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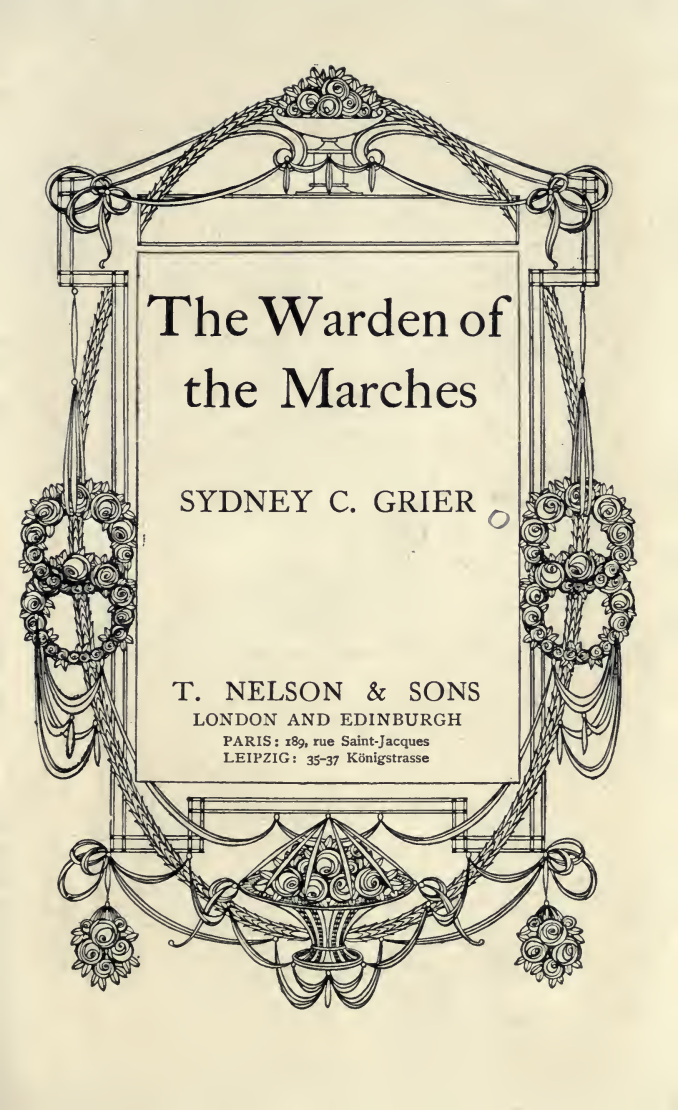
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Dick rode out.



The Warden of
the Marches

SYDNEY C. GRIER

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THE WARDEN OF THE MARCHES.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMING OF QUEEN MAB.

“**T**HEN the mail’s in, Georgie ? ”
“ Yes, Dick ; it came in about half-an-hour after you started. Here are your letters.”

Major North threw himself luxuriously into a long cane chair, and held out his hand for the bundle of envelopes and papers which his wife gave him. “ Anything from Mab ? ” he asked.

“ Just a little scrap. Dick, I am getting dreadfully worried about her—her letters have been so strange for such a long time, and now the writing is so queer. She always seems as if she hadn’t a moment to spare, and yet she really has nothing particular to do now. Do you know, I am beginning to be afraid that the strain of your uncle’s illness, and the shock of his death, have been too much for her. I am sure she oughtn’t to be living all alone in that big house. I asked Cecil Egerton to look after her, and I hoped to hear from her to-day, but there is no letter. Aren’t you getting anxious your-

self?" Major North, deep in his correspondence, grunted assent. "What do you think we had better do? Dick!—why, Dick!"

The letters went flying as Dick sprang up from his chair. His wife was staring incredulously at a young lady in a grey riding-habit who was cantering up the rough track, called by courtesy a drive, leading to the house from the gateway of the compound. Catching sight of the two figures on the verandah, the new-comer pulled up her horse suddenly, flung the bridle to the magnificent elderly servant who ran out from the hall-door to meet her, and slipping from her saddle, mounted the steps with a run.

"Oh, Dick! oh, Georgie! oh, my dear people, it is so good to see you again! Don't tear me in pieces between you." Her brother and his wife, dumb with astonishment, were both kissing her at once. "It is my real self, you know, and not my astral body. Now do say you are surprised to see me on the Khemistan frontier when you imagined I was in London! Don't rob me of the gratification I have come so far to enjoy."

"Surprise is no word for it. We are utterly amazed, completely flabbergasted," said Dick slowly. His sister heaved a satisfied sigh.

"Thanks, Dick; I'm so glad. I did want to surprise you."

"But, Mab, are you really only just off your journey?" cried Georgia. "You must have a bath and a rest before you talk any more."

"I come untold thousands of miles to see my only remaining relatives, and they don't think me

fit to speak to until I have had a bath and a rest!" cried Mabel. "No, Georgie, we only did a very short stage to-day, so that we might arrive clean and comfortable. You don't think Mr Burgrave would omit anything that would enable him to make a more dignified entrance into Alibad?"

"You don't mean to say that you came up with the Commissioner?" cried Dick and Georgia together.

"Rather!" A glance passed between husband and wife, and Mabel caught it. "Now, why this thushness? I had a chaperon, I assure you. I'll tell you all about it. And the Commissioner has been most kind—and patronising."

"Probably," said Dick dryly. "And was it Burgrave who escorted you to the gate here?"

"Oh no; it was that nice boy who went to Kubbet-ul-Haj with you eight years ago."

"Boy!" cried Georgia. "My dear Mab, Fitz Anstruther is one of the most rising young civilians in the province."

"And he said," went on Mabel, unheeding, "that he would look in again after dinner. Well, Georgie, he is three years younger than I am, at any rate. Now, Dick, don't be rude and say that that wouldn't make him so very young after all. I know I'm in the sere and yellow leaf. The fact was borne in upon me when I heard an angry woman on the voyage informing her cabin-mates that I was 'no chicken.'"

"What!" cried Dick. "Then the celebrated smile has been doing its deadly work as usual? How many scalps this time, Mab?"

Mabel smiled gently. It might be perfectly true,

as other women were never tired of saying, that she had no claim to be called beautiful. The most that could be said of her was that she was nice-looking, and the effect of that (it was often added spitefully) was spoilt by the singular and most unpleasing combination of fair hair with dark brown eyes. But when the ladies had said their say, Mabel knew that she had but to smile to bring every man in the neighbourhood to her feet. There was a peculiar fascination about her smile which made a slave of the man upon whom it shone. It called forth all that was best in him, roused all the chivalry of his nature, and compelled him to devote himself to Mabel's service. Various irate London cabmen, an elderly guard on the Caledonian Railway, and the magistrate who found himself obliged to fine Mabel for allowing her fox-terrier to go about unmuzzled, were among the victims. The magistrate was currently reported to have apologised privately for doing his duty, and to have been abjectly desirous of paying the fine out of his own pocket if Mabel would have allowed it. It was commonly understood that General North, Mabel's late guardian, had found his life a burden to him owing to the multitude of her suitors, and that he would scarcely allow her to go out alone lest any unwary stranger, thanked with a smile for some slight service, should be impelled to propose to her on the spot.

"Well, Mab," said Dick again, as his sister did not answer, "the voyage was the usual triumphal progress, I suppose? Any casualties?"

"No duels or suicides, Dick. The days of chiv-

alry are gone, you know. But every one was very nice. I don't count the officers—it's their business to make themselves pleasant—but the captain took me into his cabin and showed me the pictures of Mrs Captain and the little Captains, and I was told he didn't do that for everybody. The ladies were not quite as friendly as—well, as I should have liked them to be. They talked me over a good deal, too. Once they asked a rather nice boy why he and all the rest thought such a lot of me. He couldn't think of anything to say but that I was 'so awfully feminine,' don't you know. When he thought of it afterwards he was rather pleased with himself, and came and told me. It wasn't bad, was it ? ”

“ Oh, Mab ! ” said Georgia reproachfully.

“ But, Georgie, you wouldn't have me unfeminine, would you ? ”

“ Ha, ha ! ” laughed Dick. “ Well, Mab, as you have got here safely, I suppose your friends were as helpful as your friends generally are ? ”

“ They were perfectly delightful. When we got to Bombay they helped me about my luggage, and told me the right hotel, and where to get an ayah and a servant, and how to go to Bab-us-Sahel. To crown all, they found me the chaperon I told you about—who turned out to be the elderly lady who had disapproved of me most frankly of all on the voyage. Her name is Hardy, and she was coming to join her husband here. She is devoted to you, Georgie.”

“ Dear old Mrs Hardy ? I should think she was. It's mutual.”

“ Well, tastes differ. She is quite certain that I shall come to a bad end. We didn't speak very much on the way to Bab-us-Sahel, and when we got there I was horrified to find what a journey we had still before us. I knew the railway hadn't got to you yet, but I thought it would only mean perhaps a day in a palanquin, with tigers and interesting things like that jumping out of the jungle every few minutes, and brave rescuers turning up in the very nick of time to save one. I never imagined there would be days and days of riding through a desert, with no jungle and no tigers at all. Happily we fell in with Mr Burgrave when we left the railway, and as he was coming here he invited us to travel with his party in royal state, which we did. Mrs Hardy quarrelled with him most days on some pretext or other for your sakes, which I didn't think nice of her when she was enjoying his hospitality. She seemed to be convinced that everything he did was bound to bring the province to destruction.” Again Dick and Georgia exchanged glances. “ Dick, what is wrong between you and Mr Burgrave? I insist on knowing.”

“ It's unusual to find two men absolutely agreed on questions of policy,” said Dick shortly.

“ Well, just at present he has a grudge against you on my account. He considers you guilty of culpable negligence in leaving such a delicate and valuable piece of goods to find its way to Alibad unassisted. I tried to point out that the blame was entirely due to the wicked wilfulness of the piece of goods in question, but he still thinks you sadly callous.”

"We haven't heard yet what has brought her Majesty Queen Mab to Alibad at all."

"No, that's another story. (Don't you admire my local colour?) Here followeth the confession of Mabel Louisa North. I had a great idea, Georgie, a splendid idea, when uncle died and I was left alone. I thought I would become a Medical, so as to come out in time and help you. I knew you would jeer, Dick, and try to dissuade me, so I decided not to say a word until I was fairly embarked on my triumphal career. I was going to take the London Matric. in January, and when I was entered at the School of Medicine I meant to burst out into sudden blaze and wire you the astonishing news. But the whole thing missed fire horribly. You may laugh, Georgie, for I dare say you have kept your mind supple, like that old man who said he was always learning; but you don't know how frightfully difficult it is to bring your mighty intellect down again to lessons when you have not done any for years and years. Would you believe it?—I broke down under the stress of the preparation—for the *Matric.*, mind—and my eyes gave out. No, it is nothing really bad"—as Georgia uttered a horrified exclamation—"Sir William Thorneycroft pledged himself that they would soon be all right again if I gave up work and took to frivolling."

"But if there's nothing the matter with them, I can't think why he didn't tell you to rest for a month or so, and let you go on again with glasses," said Georgia.

Mabel looked a little ashamed.

“ Well, the fact is, I made rather a baby of myself. I couldn't wear glasses, Georgie—think what a guy I should look! And you can't imagine how disappointed I was. I knew that the loss of a month's work would mean that I should fail, and I was feeling very miserable altogether, after weeks of awful headaches, and my eyes hurt so, and—and—I wailed a little. Sir William was most sweet, and asked me all about it; and then he said that he really didn't think the Medical was what I was best fitted for, and he advised me to travel for a little while and forget all about it.”

“ And not give up to medicine what was meant for mankind,” murmured Dick softly.

“ And she comes out here, where we have an eye-destroying glare all the year round, and dust-storms two or three times a week, to cure her eyes!” cried Georgia.

“ My beloved Georgiana, I came here that you might minister to a mind diseased. When once the thought had flashed upon me, I simply couldn't stay in England. I just flew round to the shops and bought whatever they showed me, and started as soon as I could settle matters at home and take my passage. I went on writing to you up to the very last minute. I shouldn't wonder if the letter I posted on my way to the docks travelled in the steamer with me. Is that it there? Well, have I explained matters?”

“ It was an awful risk, Mab,” said Dick in an elder-brotherly tone. “ We might have been both ill, or out in the district, or touring in Nalapur, or anything.”

“But you weren’t, you see, so it’s all right. I had an inspiration that you’d be in your own house for Christmas. What time is dinner? Lend me a warm tea-gown, Georgie. How cold it gets here when the sun sets, and yet we were nearly roasted this morning! My belongings were to follow in a bullock-cart or two, but I haven’t heard them arrive. Oh, it is sweet to see you two again, and looking so thoroughly happy and fit, too.”

She bestowed a kiss on the top of Dick’s head, remarking as she did so that he was getting disgracefully bald, and rushed away to lavish a series of hugs on Georgia in the privacy of her own room. Her toilet did not take long when she was left alone, and she threw over her head the white shawl Georgia had left with her, and stepped out on the verandah. There was only a faint gleam of moonlight, and a sense of the vastness and dreariness of the desert around crept over her as she tried to distinguish in the blackness the lights of the Alibad cantonments, through which she had passed in the afternoon. The wind was chill, and gathering her wrap more closely round her, she turned to find her way back to the drawing-room. As she did so, the sound of a horse’s footsteps struck upon her ear. Some one was riding past the house at no great distance, riding at a smart pace, which caused a clatter of accoutrements and an occasional sharp metallic ring when the horse’s hoofs came in contact with a rock.

“How horrid it must be riding in the dark!” said Mabel to herself. “Dick,” she cried, meeting her brother in the hall, “are you expecting any one

to dinner? Some one is coming here on horse-back."

"Oh no, it's no one for us," he answered shortly.

"But where can he be going, then? I thought this was the last English house on the frontier? It's a soldier, I'm sure, for I heard his sword knocking against the stirrup, or whatever it is that makes the clinkety-clanking noise."

"I can't tell you who it is, for I don't know, but the natives will tell you, if you are particularly anxious to hear. They say it's General Keeling."

"Georgia's father? But he's dead!"

"Exactly."

"But do you mean that it's his ghost?"

"Don't talk so loud. I don't want Georgia worried just now, and she may not have noticed the sound. The natives say that whenever there is going to be trouble on the frontier St George Keeling gallops from point to point to see that things are all right, just as he would have done in his lifetime."

"Oh, but they don't believe it really?"

"You shall see. Ismail Bakhsh!" The old *chaprasi* who had met Mabel at the door came forward, gorgeous in his scarlet coat and gold badge, and saluted. "Tell the Miss Sahib who it is she hears, out beyond the far corner of the compound."

The old man drew himself up and saluted again. "Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib Bahadar rides to-night, Miss Sahib."

"Oh, how dreadful!" said Mabel, turning to her brother with a blanched face. Ismail Bakhsh understood her words.

“Nay, Miss Sahib, it is well, rather. When the day comes that there is trouble on the border, and Kilin Sahib does not ride, then the reign of the Sarkar will be ended in Khemistan, and it may be in all Hindustan also.”

“That will do, Ismail Bakhsh,” said Dick, when he had interpreted the old man’s words. “Come into the drawing-room, Mab.”

“But, Dick, it can’t be true? Isn’t some one playing a trick?”

“We have never been able to bring it home to any one if it is a trick. Anstruther and I have watched in vain, and most of the fellows from the cantonments have had a try too. We heard just what you hear, but we could never see anything.”

“Dick, I think you are most awfully brave.” Mabel shuddered as she pictured Dick and his friend approaching the sound, locating it exactly, perhaps—oh, horror!—hearing it pass between them, while still there was nothing to be seen. “Does it—he—ever come any nearer? How fearful if he should ride up to the door!”

“Why, Mab, you don’t mean to say you believe in it?” Dick looked at her curiously. “It’s quite true that the sound is heard when there’s going to be trouble, for I have noticed it time after time; but I have a very simple theory to account for that. When the tribes living beyond this stretch of desert intend to make themselves disagreeable, they send mounted messengers to one another. The desert air carries sound well, and I’m not prepared to say that these rocks here may not have some peculiar property which makes them carry sound well too,

but at any rate we hear, as if it was quite close, what is actually happening miles and miles away."

"Oh, do you really think so?" Mabel was much cheered. "But, then, why should Georgia be frightened if she heard it?"

"Because of the trouble it foreshadows, which is a sad and sober reality, not on account of the supernatural story the natives have taken it into their heads to get up."

Georgia's entrance and the announcement of dinner banished the disquieting topic, and Mabel's creepy sensations vanished speedily under the influence of the light and warmth and brightness encompassing the meal, so eminently Western and ordinary in its appointments save for the presence of the noiseless Hindu servants. Old times and scenes were discussed by the three, and family jokes recalled with infinite zest, in momentary entire forgetfulness of the turbulent frontier and the haunted desert outside. Shortly after a move had been made into the drawing-room, however, the flow of reminiscences was interrupted by the entrance of Dick's subordinate, the handsome young civilian who had escorted Mabel to her brother's door. He walked in unannounced, as one very much at home.

"With Dr. Tighe's compliments to the rival practitioner," he said, handing a copy of the *Lancet* to Georgia. "I shall pass the Doctor's quarters going home, Mrs North, so I can leave your *British Medical* for him if you have done with it."

"I will put it out for you," said Georgia. "You have seen Miss North already, I think?"

"Yes, indeed. It was this afternoon that I had

the astonishment and delight of learning that the Kumpsoner Sahib had atoned for all his sins against this frontier."

"What, does Burgrave climb down?" cried Dick.

"Not a bit of it, Major. He's on the war-path, and seeing red. But he has escorted Miss North safely here."

"Oh, is Mr Burgrave anxious for war?" asked Mabel. "I suppose that's the trouble which is coming on the frontier, then?" She stooped suddenly, with a guilty glance at Georgia.

"Never mind, Mab; I heard it," said her sister-in-law quietly.

"I should think so!" cried Fitzgerald Anstruther. "The old joker—beg your pardon, Mrs North—the old ch—General—was riding like mad. No, Miss North, war is the last thing that our most peaceful-minded Commissioner desires. He is coming to bring this benighted province up to date, and assimilate it to the well-governed districts he has known hitherto."

"After all, we can't be sure of his intentions," said Georgia. "What we have heard may be only rumour."

"No; he is on the war-path, Mrs North, as I said. Young Timson, of the Telegraphs, who came up with him, was in with me just now, and says that he talked quite openly of his plans."

"I don't mind the man's intentions," cried Dick hotly, "if they are founded on an honest opinion. What I do mind is his talking of them to outsiders as if they were accomplished facts, before he has said a word to the men on the spot."

“ Oh, but you forget that the Commissioner’s intentions are as good as accomplished facts, Major,” said Fitz. “ ‘ Is it not already done, Sahib ? ’ as my old villain of a bearer says when I tell him to do something he has no idea of doing.”

“ ‘ For the Khans must come down and Amirs they must frown
When the Kumpsioner Sahib says “ Stop ! ”
(Poor beggars !—we’re here to say “ Stop ! ”)’

aren’t we ? ” he added dolefully. “ Timson says that Burgrave is particularly strong on cutting loose from Nalapur.”

“ Oh, do explain these technicalities a little ! ” pleaded Mabel. Her brother took up the task promptly, seeming to find in it some sort of relief to his feelings.

“ I suppose you know that Khemistan has always been governed on a plan of its own ? When it was first annexed Georgia’s father was put in charge of this frontier, which was then the wildest, thievingest, most lawless place in creation. He raised the Khemistan Horse, and used them indiscriminately as troops and police. Small parties were stationed all along the frontier, and they were ready to march in any direction, day or night, at the news of a raid or a scrimmage. Within a few years the frontier was quiet, and General Keeling kept it so. He had his own methods of doing it, and the Government didn’t always agree with them, wherefore he ragged the Government, and the Government snubbed him, horribly. However, he held on to his post, and died at it, and then the bad old days began again.

That was just before I came up here, and I found that the people looked back to Sinjāj Kilin's days as a kind of Golden Age——”

“Oh, Dick, they do still,” cried Mabel. “It makes poor Mr Burgrave so vexed. He told me that whenever an old chief comes to pay his respects, the first thing he asks is always whether the Commissioner Sahib knew Sinjāj Kilin. He got so tired of it at last that he said he would have given worlds to shout, ‘Thank goodness, *no!*’”

“Don't doubt it for a moment. Well, they tried to govern Khemistan on the lines of the province next door, which has always been in the hands of the opposition school. Result—confusion, and all but civil war. Most of St George Keeling's young men gave up in disgust, and the Amir of Nalapur, just across the frontier, who had been the General's firm ally, was goaded into enmity. That was the state of things five years ago.”

“And then,” said Georgia, “dear old Sir Magnus Pater, who was Commissioner for Khemistan in my father's time, used all his influence to get Dick appointed Frontier Superintendent. It was the last thing he did before he retired, and we were thankful to leave Iskandarbagh, and to get back to our very own country.”

“And in less than no time,” put in Fitz, “the frontier was quiet, thanks to a judicious revival of General Keeling's methods, and the Amir of Nalapur was assuring Major North that he was his father and his mother. Mrs North's fame as a physician of supernatural powers, and the Major's military discipline, have worked wonders in crushing the

proud and extorting the respectful admiration of the submissive."

"Oh, that reminds me!" cried Mabel. "Georgie, do you write Dick's reports for him? Mr Burgrave really believes you do."

("Oh, Miss North, what an injudicious question!" murmured Fitz, *sotto voce*.)

"Certainly not," returned Georgia briskly. "Do you think I would encourage Dick in such idleness? We write them together."

"But," objected Mabel, "I can't see why Mr Burgrave should come to disturb all you have done if you have got on so well."

"O wise young judge!" said Dick. "That's exactly what we can't see either."

"Because he is tired of hearing General Keeling alluded to as the best feared, and loved, and hated man in Anglo-Indian history," said Fitz. "Because to see your next-door neighbour succeeding where you have failed, by dint of methods which you regard with holy horror, is distasteful to the natural man. But let me tell you a little story, Miss North—an Oriental apologue, full of local colour. The ruler of many millions was glancing over the map of his dominions one morning, when his symmetry-loving eye lit upon one province governed differently from all the rest. To him, imperiously demanding an explanation, there enters Eustace Burgrave, Esq., of the Secretariat, C.S.I. and other desirable things, armed with a beautifully written minute on the subject, and points out that the province is not only a scandal and an eyesore, but a happy hunting-ground for firebrand soldier-politicals who know

better than viceroys—a class of persons that obviously ought to be stamped out in the interests of good government. Any remedies for this atrocious state of things? Naturally, Mr Burgrave is prepared with measures that will make Khemistan the garden of India and a lasting memorial of the ruler's happy reign. No time is wasted. 'Take the province, Burgrave,' says the Great Great One, with tears of emotion, 'and my blessing with it,' and Burgrave accepts both. Hitherto he has been reforming the course of nature down by the river, now he comes up here to teach us a lesson in our turn."

"And do you mean to let him do what he likes?" cried Mabel.

"Nonsense, Mab! He is supreme here," said Dick.

"Besides, Miss North," Fitz went on, "the Commissioner's imposing personality puts opposition out of the question. You must have noticed the condescending loftiness of his manner, springing from the assurance that his career will be in the future, as in the past, a succession of triumphs. Failure is not in his vocabulary. He is born for greatness. Who could see that cold blue eye, that monumental nose, and doubt it? Nothing short of a general convulsion of nature could disturb the even tenor of his way."

"Well, I am not quite sure of that," said Mabel musingly.

"Oh, I'm afraid there's no hope of him as a lady's man, if that's what you mean, Miss North. It is understood that he's by no means a hardened misogynist, but neither is he looking for a wife. He is simply waiting quite dispassionately to see

whether the feminine counterpart of his perfections will ever present herself. Year after year at Calcutta and Simla he has surveyed the newest young ladies out from home and found them wanting, and their mothers go away into corners and call him names, which is unjust. His fitting mate would scarcely appear once in a lifetime, perhaps not in an age."

"I think Mr Burgrave needs a lesson," said Mabel.

"But consider, Miss North. It is no obscure future that the favoured damsel will be called upon to share. In time she will clothe her rickshawmen at Simla in scarlet, and by-and-by, if she does what he tells her, she will sport the Crown of India on a neat coloured ribbon."

"I think it will be well for me to take him in hand," Mabel persisted.

"For goodness' sake, Mab, don't make matters worse by importing the celebrated smile into the affair!" cried Dick.

"Worse? Dick, you are ungrateful. When Mr Burgrave has found himself mistaken in one matter of importance, he will be less cocksure in others."

"I don't know about that," said Georgia. "And take care, Mab. It's dangerous playing with edged tools."

"Then I will take the risk. Reverence your heroic sister, Dick, willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of your career."

"And if the worst come to the worst, the prospective glories of the viceregal throne will gild the pill," said Fitz.

CHAPTER II.

“ LIFE IS REAL ; LIFE IS EARNEST.”

“ OH, Georgie, I do so want a good long talk.”

It was the morning after Mabel's arrival, and she had settled herself on the verandah with her work, a laudable pretence in which no one had ever seen her set a stitch. After Dick had ridden away, she yawned a good deal, and looked out more than once disconsolately over the desert in search of entertainment, which failed to present itself, and Georgia had her household duties to perform before she could devote herself to amusing her sister-in-law. Mabel had several distant glimpses of her laying down the law to submissive servants, and paying surprise visits in the compound, but at last she mounted the steps, threw aside her sun-hat, and bringing out a work-basket, spread a little pile of delicate cambric upon the table before her.

“ Talk, then,” she said, with a pin in her mouth.

“ But you are sure we shan't be interrupted? Have you quite done ? ”

“ I think we are safe. I have visited the cook-house and the dairy, interviewed the gardener, arranged about the horses' and cow's food as well

as our own, and physicked all the invalids in the neighbourhood. So begin, Mab."

"Well, don't you want to know my real reasons for coming out?"

"I thought we heard them last night—such as they are."

"How nasty you are, Georgie! Didn't you guess that there were other reasons behind, reserved for your private ear, and not to be exposed to Dick's ribaldry? The truth is, I was hungering and thirsting for reality, and that's why I came."

"My beloved Mab, is England a world of shadows?"

"It is exactly that—to women in our class of life, at any rate—and I am sick of shadows. Our life has become so smooth, and polished, and refined, that it is not life at all. We are all Tomlinsons more or less—getting our emotions second-hand from books and plays. Some of us go into the slums or the hospitals in search of experiences (you'll say that was what I tried to do), but even then we only see things, we don't feel them. I wanted to get to a place where things still happened, where there were real people and real passions."

"Do you know, Mab—" Georgia fixed a critical eye on her—"if you had been a little younger, I should have suspected you of a yearning to enter the Army Nursing Service? I can't tell you how many girls have lamented to me at different times the unreality of their lives, and proposed to set them right by means of that particular act of self-sacrifice. But as things are, I suppose, to use plain English, you were bored?"

"Bored to exasperation, then, you unsympathetic

creature ! But I am serious, Georgie. There's some thing you quoted in one of your letters from Kubbet-ul-Haj that has haunted me ever since, and expresses what I mean. It was something like 'When the world grows too refined and too cultured, God sends great judgments to beat us back to the beginning of history again, to toils and pain and peril, and the old first heroic lessons—how to fight and how to endure.' It would be absurd for me, in England, to take to living in a slum, making my own things, and teaching people who are much better than I am, but I thought out here——”

“And you find Dick and me dressing for dinner every evening, and getting the magazines monthly ! You had better cross the border into Ethiopia, Mab. We are just as artificial here as at home.”

“Georgie ! as if I wanted to make a savage of myself, like the youth in 'Locksley Hall' ! Surely life can be simple and primitive without being squalid ? ”

“You haven't asked my advice, and I don't know whether you want it, but it's dreadfully commonplace. Get married.”

“You mean that I should know then what reality is ? What an indictment to bring against Dick ! What in the world does he do to you, Georgie ? ”

Georgia smiled superior. “You don't expect me to begin to defend Dick to you ? ” she asked, then laughed aloud. “No, Mab, you needn't try to tease me about him at this hour of the day. But what I mean is, that you get into the way of looking at things in quite a different light when you are married. You don't hold a brief for your own sex

any longer, but for men as well. That makes the difference, I think. You are in the middle instead of on one side, and that is at any rate a help towards seeing life whole."

"But do you always look at things now through Dick's spectacles? How painfully monotonous!"

"We don't always agree, of course. But we talk things over together, and generally one convinces the other. If not, we agree to differ."

Mabel shook her head. "Then I'm perfectly certain that you and Dick have never differed in a really vital matter," she said. "In that case I know quite well that neither of you would ever convince the other, and you could not conscientiously agree to differ, so what is to happen?"

Georgia did not seem to hear her. She rose and went into the drawing-room, and unlocking a little carved cabinet that stood on her writing-table, took something out of a secret drawer. "Look at this, Mab," she said, handing Mabel a piece of paper. It was a photograph, obviously the work of an amateur, of a little grave surrounded by lofty trees.

"Oh, Georgie!" the tears sprang to Mabel's eyes; "this is baby's grave?"

Georgia nodded. "Dick doesn't know that I have it," she said, speaking quickly. "Mr Anstruther took the photograph for me, and I had one framed, and it always hung in my room. I used to sit and look at it when Dick was out. Sometimes I cried a little, of course, but I never thought he would notice. But he took it into his head that I was fretting, and when we left Iskandarbagh he gave the

servants a hint to lose the picture in moving. Wasn't it just like him, dear fellow? But he never bargained for the servants letting out the truth to me. I had this one as well ; but when I saw how Dick felt about it I took care to keep it hidden away, and he thinks his plan has succeeded, and that I have forgotten. It makes him so much happier.”

“I see,” said Mabel, in a low voice. “You wouldn't have done that once, Georgie. I see the difference. But surely there is a name on the stone?” She was examining the photograph closely. “She was baptized, then? I never heard——”

“Yes, Dick baptized her ; there was no one else. Georgia Mabel, he would have it so. Oh, Mab, it was awful, that time! We were the only English people at Iskandarbagh just then, and the tribes were out on the frontier. Miss Jenkins, the Babus-Sahel missionary, was coming to me. Since I knew her first, she has been home to take the medical course, and is fully qualified. Well, she could not get to me, and I couldn't get to Khemistan, and I had to stay where I was and be doctor and patient both. Of course I had my dear good Rahah, and Dick was as gentle as any woman ; but oh, it was terrible! But I shouldn't have minded afterwards if only baby had lived. She was such a darling, Mab, with fair hair and dark eyes, like yours. Dick tried to cheer me up—chaffed me about her being so small and weak—but she died in my arms a few minutes after she was baptized. Miss Jenkins got through to us the next day at the risk of her life, but she was only in time for the—the funeral in the Residency garden.”

"And you lived through that? Oh, Georgie, it would have killed me."

"Oh no; there was Dick, you know. Poor dear Dick! he was disappointed about baby, of course; but a man doesn't feel that sort of thing as a woman does. Besides, he was so glad I didn't die too, that he really could not think of anything else."

"And you, Georgie?"

"I can't talk of it, Mab, even to you—how I longed to die. But he never knew it. And when I was better, I saw how wicked I had been. I would have lost anything rather than leave him alone."

"Well," said Mabel, trying to speak lightly, "you have made acquaintance with realities, Georgie, at any rate; but I don't know that I am very keen on following in your footsteps. I believe you have made me afraid of taking your advice. Marriage seems to involve experiences out here which one doesn't get at home."

"It does," agreed Georgia, "and I suppose they would be too much for some women. But when you love the country and the people as I do—and love your husband, of course—you would scarcely come out here with him if you didn't—I think the life brings you nearer to each other than anything else could. It is such an absolute *solitude à deux*, you see, and you are so completely shut up to one another, that you seem really to become one, not just figuratively. It's rather a terrible experiment to make, as you say, but if it succeeds—why, then it's the very best thing in the world."

"I can't quite fancy myself thinking of Mr Burgrave like that," murmured Mabel reflectively.

“ Mab, I didn't think——”

“ Oh, I beg your pardon, Georgie. If I didn't laugh I should cry. And there's Dick coming back, and he'll see we have been crying. Talk about something else, quick ! ”

“ I was wondering whether you would like to pay a call or two,” said Georgia, thrusting a wet handkerchief hastily into her pocket. “ I don't want to drag you out if you are still tired after your journey, but it would be nice for you to get to know people before all the Christmas festivities begin next week.”

“ Of course ! ” Mabel's sudden animation was not wholly assumed for Dick's benefit as he rode past the verandah. “ Who is there to call upon ? ”

“ Only your friend Mrs Hardy, whose husband is the missionary here, and acts as chaplain, and Flora Graham, the Colonel's daughter, I am afraid. Nearly all the men are bachelors or grass-widowers at this station. Two or three ladies will come in from Rahmat-Ullah and the other outlying stations next week, but we are still scarce enough to be valuable.”

“ That's a state of things of which I highly approve,” said Mabel.

“ Never knew a woman that didn't,” said Dick, entering. “ Ask Georgia if she doesn't like to see the men round her chair, though she pretends to think they're attracted by her professional reputation. But Miss Graham is coming to call on you, Mab. She is dying to see you, but feared you would be too tired to pay visits this week. In gratitude for this honour, don't you think you ought to refrain from exercising your fascinations on her young man ? ”

“ Really, Dick, I don’t know what you can think of me. Is Miss Graham engaged ? ”

“ Rather ; to young Haycraft, of the Regiment.”

“ Ah, I fly at higher game,” said Mabel austerely.

“ So I should have guessed.”

“ Oh, Dick, have you seen the Commissioner ? ” cried Georgia.

“ Been closeted with him nearly all morning.”

“ And was he very horrid ? ”

“ By no means. He didn’t make any secret of his reforming intentions, but he gave me no hint as to his plan for carrying them out. He only tells that sort of thing to casual fellow-travellers, I suppose. But I think he wished to make himself agreeable, and I attribute that to my having the honour of being Miss Mabel North’s brother.”

“ Ah ! ” said Mabel wisely.

Late that afternoon she and Georgia set forth to visit Mrs Hardy, much against Mabel’s will. She represented that she had only parted from the good lady the day before, and had not the slightest desire to renew the acquaintance, but Georgia was firm.

“ We will only go in for a minute or two, for we must be back early to meet the Grahams, but I could not bear her to think herself slighted.”

When they reached the missionary’s bungalow they found it in the throes of a general turn-out. The verandah was piled with furniture, and here Mrs Hardy, a worn-looking little woman with a lined face, and thin grey hair screwed into an unbecoming knob, received them in the lowest possible spirits. She had always prophesied that the house would go to rack and ruin during her absence in England,

and now she perceived that it had. Only that morning she had discovered the fragments of her very best damask table-cloth doing duty as dusters, and three silver spoons were missing. Moreover, she believed she was on the verge of further discoveries that would compel her to dismiss at least half the servants. Georgia's inquiry after Mr Hardy elicited the fact that he had contracted the bad habit of having his meals served in his study and reading while he partook of them, which was bound to have a prejudicial effect on his digestion in the future, while Mrs Hardy felt morally certain that he had gone to church in rags for many Sundays past. Yes, he had spoken very cheerfully of several interesting inquirers who had come to him of late, but Mrs Hardy had, and would continue to have, grave doubts as to the genuineness of their motives. Georgia sighed, and turned the conversation to the subject of the journey from the coast, but this only opened the way for a fresh flood of forebodings. The new Commissioner was bent on mischief, and the natives were perceptibly uneasy. Where they were not defiant they were sullen, and Mrs Hardy's eagle eye foresaw trouble ahead. Perceiving that Georgia was not entirely at one with her, she descended suddenly to details.

“ Ah, dear Mrs North, I know you think I am a pessimist, but when you hear what I have to tell you——! Is—is Miss North in your confidence——politically speaking?” with a meaning glance at Mabel.

“ In our confidence ! ” cried Georgia, in astonishment. “ Of course she is. Why not ? ”

Mrs Hardy bridled. "I am relieved to hear that Miss North is not so entirely taken up with the Commissioner as to have no thought for her dear brother's interests," she said acidly. "Well, I must tell you that I hear on good authority that Mr Burgrave intends to allow Bahram Khan to return to Nalapur. In the course of our journey he gave a private audience to a Hindu whom I recognised as Narayan Singh, the brother of the Nalapur Vizier Ram Singh, and I now hear that he has been closeted with him again to-day. Ram Singh has always been suspected of intriguing for Bahram Khan's return, and Narayan Singh has divided his time between Nalapur and Ethiopia for years."

"Oh, but it's quite impossible!" cried Georgia. "The Commissioner would never take such a step without consulting my husband, and Dick would never countenance it. Bahram Khan has sinned beyond forgiveness."

"I wish I could think so!" said Mrs Hardy oracularly. "We shall soon see, my dear Mrs North. What, must you go? I wonder Major North likes you to drive that high dog-cart. You will certainly have an accident some day."

"Odious woman!" cried Mabel, as the dog-cart dashed down the road. "How can you endure her, Georgie? She is the very incarnation of spite."

"No, no—of hopelessness," said Georgia. "The climate tries her, and her children are all being educated at home, and she thinks Mr Hardy is not appreciated here. Dear old man! I wish you could have seen him, Mabel. He is all patience and cheerfulness, and indeed, it is a good thing that he has

Mrs Hardy to keep him within bounds. All our people and the native Christians love him, and even the mullahs who come to argue with him can't succeed in hating him. His learning is really wasted up here, and I don't think he has had more than six baptisms of converts in the five years we have known him. We always say that the natives who become Christians here must be very much in earnest, for Mrs Hardy discourages them so conscientiously beforehand."

"Horrid old thing, spoiling her husband's work!" cried Mabel.

"No, not at all. He has been taken in more than once. And really, Mab, it is hard for us to urge these people to be baptized. The persecution is awful."

"Here—under English rule?"

"Not from us, of course, but from their own people. Two men have been lured across the frontier and murdered, and another had a false charge trumped up against him, and only just escaped hanging. It seems scarcely fair on our part unless we can get them away to another part of India."

"Well, Mrs Hardy isn't exactly a good example of the effects of Christianity. She is enough to frighten away any number of intending converts."

"And yet she is the staunchest friend possible at a pinch. I had rather have her with me in an emergency than any other woman I know."

"That's because she likes you. She hates me, and would rejoice to make my life a burden to me. The idea of hinting that I would betray Dick's

secrets to Mr Burgrave! Wasn't it infamous? But who is Bahram Khan?"

"He is the Amir of Nalapur's nephew, and was intended to succeed to the throne, but in order to expedite matters he tried to poison both his uncle and Dick's predecessor here, who had been obliged to scold him for some of his doings. The matter could not be absolutely proved against him, but he thought it well to take refuge in Ethiopia, and has stayed there ever since. To guard against his returning, Dick advised the Amir to adopt another nephew, Bahadar Shah, as his successor, and he did. Bahram Khan is only about twenty-three now, but he married an Ethiopian lady of rank four years ago. His poor old mother, who is one of my Nalapur patients, was very sore at his arranging it without consulting her. She remained at her brother's court when her son escaped, for it was she who saved the lives of the Amir and Sir Henry Gaunt. She suspected her son's intentions, and tasted the food prepared for the banquet he was going to give. It made her very ill, but she gave the warning, and I was sent for post-haste from Iskandarbagh in time to save her life. She is a dear, grateful old thing."

"But do you think Mr Burgrave will let Bahram Khan come back?"

"Oh no, it's impossible. But I wish," added Georgia thoughtfully, "that I hadn't been so emphatic in denying it to Mrs Hardy. If anything happens now, she will know that Dick and the Commissioner are not in accord."

"But why shouldn't she know?"

"Because out here we learn to stick together.

Quarrel in private as much as you like, but present a united front to the foe,” said Georgia sententiously, as she pulled up before her own verandah. Two horses, in charge of native grooms, were waiting at the door.

“Our visitors have arrived before us,” said Mabel, and they hurried into the drawing-room, to find an elderly man of soldierly appearance and a tall yellow-haired girl waiting patiently for them.

“I’m afraid you will think us very rude for thrusting ourselves upon you so soon, and at this time of day,” said Miss Graham, addressing herself to Mabel, after Georgia had apologised for their absence, “but my father happened to have time to come with me just now, and I was so very anxious to see you——”

“How sweet of you !” murmured Mabel softly, as the visitor stopped abruptly.

“Because I want to ask you a favour,” finished Miss Graham. Her father laughed, and Mabel looked politely interested. “I want you to be Queen of the Tournament next week instead of me.”

“Oh, Georgie !” cried Mabel ; “and you said that life out here was modern and unromantic ! Why, here we are plunged into the Middle Ages at once.”

“It’s only my daughter’s poetical way of speaking of our annual gymkhana,” explained Colonel Graham. “She has officiated so often that she feels shy. The real fact is,” he turned confidentially to Georgia, “Haycraft has loafed about here so much that he’s wretchedly stale this year, and Flora can’t bear to give a prize to any one else.”

“No, no, papa ; what a shame !” cried Miss

Graham, blushing. "You see, Miss North, I have really done it a good many times, and I'm sure everybody would like to see some one new. Besides, I am engaged, you know, and—and——"

"And it would make it more realistic if the opposing heroes felt they were really struggling for the Queen's favour?" said her father. "Well, that's easily managed. Intimate to Haycraft that unless he wins he'll have to resign you to the successful competitor."

"But why ask me?" said Mabel.

"Because there's no one else," replied Miss Graham quickly. "No, I don't mean that; but my father says I ought to ask the Commissioner to give the prizes, and I don't like him well enough. But he couldn't possibly be offended if I asked you. It's so obviously the proper thing."

"Now, why?" asked Mabel again, and the other girl blushed once more.

"I saw you yesterday when you rode past our house," she said shyly, "and I knew at once that you were the right person."

Mabel smiled graciously. Such open admiration from one of her own sex was rare enough to be grateful to her. "I am wondering what I should wear," she said. "I have a little muslin frock——"

"Oh!" said Miss Graham, evidently disappointed. "But perhaps—do you think I might see it?"

"If Georgie and Colonel Graham will excuse us for a moment," said Mabel rising, and she led the way to her own room, and summoned the smiling brown-faced ayah whom she had brought from Bombay.

“ Oh ! ” cried Flora Graham again, when the “ little muslin frock ” was displayed to her, but her tone was not now one of disappointment. The frock might be little, whatever that term might mean as applied to a gown, but it was not therefore to be despised. It was undoubtedly made of muslin, but it had a slip of softest primrose silk, and the glories of frills and lace and primrose ribbon which decked it bewildered her eyes. “ It is lovely ! ” she said slowly ; “ and look how your ayah appreciates it. I wish mine ever had the chance of regarding one of my gowns with such reverential admiration ! And what hat will you wear with it ? ”

“ They tried to make me have one swathed in white and primrose chiffon,” said Mabel indifferently, “ but I knew I could never stand that. I shall wear this one with it.” She indicated a large black picture hat.

“ That will be perfect,” said Miss Graham. “ It’s the finishing touch. Oh, you will—you must—give the prizes. That gown would be wasted otherwise. You will do it, won’t you ? ”

Yielding sweetly to the eager entreaties showered upon her Mabel consented, and in the talk which followed set herself to gain an acquaintance with all the gaieties that were to be expected during the following week. When Georgia came to say that Colonel Graham was obliged to leave, the two girls were discussing ball dresses with the keenest interest.

“ I can’t make Mabel out,” Georgia said to her husband that night. “ Sometimes she seems in such

deadly earnest, and yet she is as anxious as possible to take part in everything that is going on."

"But why in the world shouldn't she?"

"It's not that; but I can't think why she should care for it."

"No, I suppose not. You never felt that you must play the fool for a bit now and then or die, did you, Georgie? But Mab does—has periodical fits of it, alternating with the deadly earnest. Let her alone to have her fling. She'll settle down some day, and it's not as if it did any harm."

But Georgia was not convinced.

CHAPTER III.

“ IN HIS SIMPLICITY SUBLIME.”

“ THE Major not back from the durbar yet, I suppose, Mrs North? Have you heard this extraordinary report about Bahram Khan?”

“ No, I didn't know there was any report going about,” answered Georgia. She was driving Mabel to the club, and had stopped to speak to the station surgeon, a cheerful little stout man, riding a frisky pony which danced merrily about the road, while its master tried in vain to induce it to stand still.

“ It's all over the bazaar, and one of the hospital assistants told me. They say that the Commissioner means to insist on Bahram Khan's being restored to his lands and honours, and to advise poor old Ashraf Ali strongly to accept him again as his heir.”

“ Oh, that gives the whole thing away,” said Georgia, more cheerily, “ for the Amir's adoption of Bahadar Shah was recognised by the Government of India. Was all this to happen to-day, Dr Tighe?”

“ Yes, at this durbar. Quite thrilling, isn't it? Well, I must be off on my rounds. When am I to have that game of tennis you promised me, Miss

North?" and the doctor rode away, while Georgia drove on, with brows drawn into an anxious frown.

"It's quite impossible," she said at last, rousing herself. "He couldn't spring such a mine upon us. Look, Mab! this is my father's old house."

"But why don't you live in it?" asked Mabel, looking with much interest at the flat-roofed building with its massive stone walls and narrow windows. Georgia laughed.

"Because the accommodation is a little too Spartan for a family," she said. "My father prided himself on his powers of roughing it, and all his young men had to follow his example. Mr Anstruther inhabits the house at present, in company with the official records, for the office is large and airy, and Dick uses it still."

"I should have thought General Keeling would have lived in the fort," said Mabel, as a sharp turn in the road brought them in sight of the dust-coloured walls and mouldering battlements, crowned with withered grass, of the old border stronghold.

"Never!" cried Georgia. "The first thing he did on coming here was to dismantle it. He would never allow either the Khemistan Horse or his British officers to hide behind walls. Their safety had to depend on their own watchfulness."

"He had the courage of his convictions, at any rate."

"Of course. He never told any one to do what he would not do himself. He wanted to blow up the fort and destroy it altogether; but the Government objected in the interests of archæology, so he gave it to the station for a club-house. There has

never been too much money to spare in Alibad, and people have used it gratefully ever since.”

“What a delicious old place!” sighed Mabel, as they drove in through the hospitable gateway, on either side of which the ancient doors, warped and worm-eaten and paintless, leaned useless against the wall. The block of buildings which had comprised the chief apartments of the fort in the wild days before the coming of the British was now utilised as the club-house, and an inner courtyard had been ingeniously converted into a tennis-ground. As she passed, Mabel caught a glimpse through the archway of Flora Graham and her *fiancé*, young Haycraft, playing vigorously, but she also noticed something else.

“Georgie, there’s Mrs Hardy looking out for you.”

“Oh dear!” cried Georgia in a panic, “I can’t meet her just now, until I know the truth about Bahram Khan. She is waiting to gloat over me about this horrible rumour, and I can’t stand it. I am going to take you up to the ramparts, Mab, to see the view.”

She gave the reins to the groom, and, avoiding the reading-room, in the verandah of which could be discerned Mrs Hardy’s depressed-looking bonnet, hurried Mabel across the wide courtyard and up a flight of steps which led to the summit of the western wall. From this, at some risk to life and limb, they were able to reach one of the half-ruined towers, which commanded a bird’s-eye view of the town. The native quarter, with its narrow, crooked alleys and carefully guarded flat roofs, the lines, painfully neat in the mathematical symmetry of their

rows of white huts, the houses in the cantonments, embowered in pleasant gardens, were all spread before them. Beyond the belt of green which marked the limits of the irrigated land round the town, the desert stretched on the east and south as far as the eye could see. To the west was a range of rugged hills, their nearer spurs within rifle-shot of the fort, and to the north, at a much greater distance, the peaks, at this season covered with snow, of a considerable mass of mountains.

"That is Nalapur," said Georgia, pointing to the mountains, "and beyond it to the eastward is Ethiopia. Our house is the last on British soil. The corner of the compound exactly touches the frontier line."

"Then that's why your father rides past just there?" said Mabel unthinkingly.

"So the natives say. I rather like to think of him as still guarding the frontier which he spent his life in defending. It's a nice idea, I mean—that's all. But, Mab, the men are coming back from the durbar. Look at that dust-cloud, and you will see the light strike on something shining every now and then. That's the bravery of their durbar get-up. We will wait here until they get into the town, and capture the first that comes this way. I must find out what has happened."

They watched the cavalcade enter the town and separate into its component parts, and presently saw Fitz Anstruther riding up to the fort. He caught sight of their parasols and waved his hand, but Georgia dragged Mabel down the steps, and they met him in the courtyard.

“ You’ve heard, then ? ” he cried, as his eyes fell on Georgia’s face.

“ Only a bazaar rumour. Is it true that Bahram Khan—— ? ”

“ He is restored to his estates and rank, and recommended by the Commissioner to the particular favour of his uncle. Burgrave had him all ready outside the tent, it appears, and after enlarging to the Amir and the luckless Bahadar Shah on the blessings of family unity, and the advisability of forgiving and forgetting youthful peccadilloes, brought him in as a practical embodiment of his words. It was dramatic—very—but it was playing it awfully low down on us, especially the Major.”

“ Then he knew nothing of it ? ”

“ No more than I did.”

“ And Ashraf Ali was willing to take the Commissioner’s advice ? ”

“ He hadn’t much choice. A glance from Major North would have turned the scale, but you know what the Major is, Mrs North—he will play fair by his own side, however badly they may have treated him. He gave him no encouragement to show fight, and Ashraf Ali took a back seat. It is rather tough to have to receive again into the bosom of your family an affectionate nephew who has tried to murder you, isn’t it ? ”

“ But how does the Commissioner get over that little difficulty ? ”

“ Airily ignores it. ‘ Not guilty, and won’t do it again,’ is his view. Every prospect of domestic happiness in the Amir’s family circle in future.”

“ Where is Dick now ? ” asked Georgia suddenly.

“ I rather think he has gone to have it out with the Kumpsioner Sahib. He was horribly sick, and who can wonder ? ”

“ I really think,” said Mabel, quite inconsequently, “ that if I couldn’t pick up my own balls I wouldn’t play tennis.”

They were sitting in the verandah overlooking the tennis-court, and it was the sight of the squad of small boys in uniform who were being kept hard at work by the three men now playing that had called forth the remark.

“ We get so slack with the climate,” pleaded Fitz.

“ Well, I don’t intend to let those boys pick up my balls when I play.”

“ They won’t have the chance, Miss North. We should simply massacre them if they attempted it. Oh, here’s the Major—and the Commissioner ! ”

Dick was still in uniform, and the man who emerged with him from under the archway was quite thrown into the shade by his magnificence, but the contrast did not appear to afflict Mr Burgrave, even if he noticed it. He crossed the shadowed court with slow, deliberate steps, apparently unaware that he was interrupting the game, talking all the time to Dick, who listened courteously, but without conviction.

“ What a curious face it is ! ” muttered Georgia involuntarily, as the Commissioner stepped into the line of light cast by a lamp in one of the rooms.

“ Yes, doesn’t he look the pig-headed brute he is ? ” was the joyful response of Fitz, who had overheard her.

“ No, that’s not it. He looks obstinate enough,

but there is something benevolent about the face—nothing cruel or mean. It’s the face of a fanatic.”

“ Oh no, Mrs North ! There’s bound to be something good about even a fanatic at bottom, I suppose. Won’t you say a doctrinaire ? ”

“ If you prefer it. I mean a man who has formed certain opinions, and allows neither facts nor arguments to prevent his forcing them upon other people.”

“ Ah, Mrs North ! ” The Commissioner was bowing before Georgia with the somewhat exaggerated courtesy which, combined with his paternal manner, caused impatient young people to brand his demeanour as patronising. “ And are you very much incensed against me for keeping your husband so busy all day ? ”

He sat down beside her as he spoke, taking little notice of Mabel, and devoted himself to her for ten minutes or more, while Dick went into the clubhouse to speak to some one. To Mabel, as to Georgia, it appeared as if Mr Burgrave’s condescension towards Dick’s wife was intended to disarm any resentment that might have been aroused in her mind by his treatment of Dick that day, although it was not easy to see why he should take so much trouble. It was Fitz on whom the true comedy of the situation dawned at last, rendering him speechless with secret delight. The Commissioner was an adept in the mental exercise known as reading between the lines, and he had formulated his own explanation of the unconventional manner in which Mabel had made her appearance upon the stage of Khemistan. Jealous of her sister-in-law’s good looks, and the

attention she attracted, Georgia had refused to invite her to pay a visit to Alibad, and the poor girl's only chance had been to take matters into her own hands. Too considerate to expose Mabel to the risk of incurring the reproaches of her family circle, Mr Burgrave would talk to Georgia long enough to put her into a good temper before he gratified his own inclinations. His reward came when Georgia rose and remarked that it was time to go home, for guessing that Dick would be driving his wife, he lost no time in offering Mabel a seat in his dog-cart. As for Mabel, she accepted the offer joyfully. Her hasty determination to give Mr Burgrave a lesson had deepened by this time into the deliberate intention of fascinating him into laying aside his distrust of Dick.

"What an interesting day you must have had!" she began guilefully, as soon as they started. "I wish ladies were admitted to durbars."

"They are, sometimes; but I fancy—" the Commissioner smiled down at her—"that there is not very much business done on those occasions."

"Oh, then to-day's was really a serious affair? Do tell me what you did."

"I am afraid it would hardly interest you."

"Indeed it would. I am interested in everything that interests my friends."

Mr Burgrave's smile became positively grandfatherly. "I thought so!" he said. "No, Miss North, I won't allow you to sacrifice yourself by talking shop to me. To tell you the truth, it doesn't interest me—out of office-hours—and therefore I am the last person in the world to inflict it

upon you. I am sure you hear so much of it all day that you are as tired of the subject as I am of the revered name of General Keeling.”

“ What, have you been hearing more about him ? ”

Mr Burgrave groaned. “ Have I not ! Michael Angelo was nothing to him. I always knew that he founded Alibad and dug its wells, planted the trees and constructed the canals—made Khemistan, in short. But now I am the unhappy recipient of endless personal anecdotes about him. One man tells me that he used to go about in the sun without a head-covering of any kind, trusting to the thickness of his hair—if it was not rude, I should say of his skull. Then comes one of his old troopers, and assures me solemnly that after a battle he had seen Sinjāj Kīlin unbutton his tunic and shake out the bullets which had passed through it without hurting him. Another remembers that he has seen him reading a letter from his wife while under fire—rather a pretty touch that—and another recalls for my admiration the fact that the General reserved an hour every morning for his private devotions, and has been known to keep the Commander-in-Chief waiting rather than allow it to be broken in upon.”

“ But he was a splendid man,” said Mabel, ashamed of herself for laughing.

“ Who doubts it ? Only too splendid ;—I understand the feelings of the gentleman who banished Aristides. But forgive me for lamenting my private woes to you, Miss North. Let us turn to more interesting themes. We are to see you in an appropriate rôle on Saturday, Miss Graham tells me.”

“ I believe I am to give away the prizes at the

Gymkhana—unless you would prefer to do it,” said Mabel, with sudden primness.

“I should not think of such a thing unless it would be a relief to you.”

“To me? I shall enjoy the prize-giving above all things. But why?”

“I imagined you might feel shy.” Mr Burgrave looked at her as kindly as ever, but Mabel fancied that he was disappointed in her in some way.

“He seems to think I am about sixteen,” she said to herself, and awoke to the fact that they had reached home, and that her companion had skilfully prevented her from saying a word about the question of the moment.

“Dick,” said Georgia to her husband, when she was alone with him that evening, “did you get any explanation out of Mr Burgrave?”

“I did—without asking for it. He told me quite calmly that the reinstatement of Bahram Khan was part of his programme, and that as I had taken such a strong line with regard to the youth’s banishment, he considered it better to relieve me of all responsibility about it. It would be pleasanter for both of us, he thought.”

“Pleasanter for you and him in your social relations, perhaps; but your prestige with the natives, Dick! What do they think?”

“Why, they gloat, most of ’em,” said Dick grimly.

“But the Amir and Bahadar Shah?”

“Oh, poor old Ashraf Ali sent his pet mullah to interview me while the Commissioner was taking an affectionate farewell of his *protégé*. The old man

really thought, or pretended to think, that I had a hand in the matter. Why hadn't I told him that I desired Bahram Khan's return instead of springing it upon him in that way? he wanted to know. Had he ever refused to take my advice? I had to assure him that I knew no more about it than he did, for if he once loses confidence in me, it means that we may as well retire from the frontier. Neither he nor the Sardars will stand a second spell of snubbing and suspicion.”

“ But what did you advise him to do? ”

“ To choose the lesser of two evils. Bahram Khan will plot wherever he is, and Burgrave has pledged himself to see his father's fortress of Dera Gul restored to him, but I advised the Amir strongly to keep him under his own eye at the capital. In any case we shall have one friend in the enemy's camp, for the good old Moti-ul-Nissa sent a message by the mullah, ‘ Tell the doctor lady's husband that where my son goes I go from henceforth, and that no harm shall be devised against the Sarkar if I can prevent it.’ ”

“ Dear old thing! ” cried Georgia.

“ But it's not so much a rising that I'm afraid of at present. Bahram Khan will get the smaller obstacles out of his way first. Poor Bahadar Shah, who is no hero, sent to ask me by the mullah whether I would advise him to throw up his pretensions and retire into British territory. Of course I told him to sit tight, but no insurance office that respected itself would look at his life after to-day. And, Georgie, I am very much mistaken if Burgrave has not got worse in store for us.”

“ Dick! what could there be worse? ” Georgia’s face was blanched.

“ I have a presentiment—call it a conviction, if you like—that they mean to withdraw the subsidy, and Ashraf Ali has got hold of the idea too.”

“ But, Dick, that would be a direct breach of faith! They couldn’t do it—they couldn’t! The treaty that really cost my father his life, he had such trouble to get it ratified! Why, it has kept the frontier safe all these years——”

“ My dear Georgie, that’s not what Burgrave and his school think about. You know as well as I do that this province is an anomaly, and has got to be reduced to the level of next-door. When Ashraf Ali received the subsidy, he accepted our suzerainty over Nalapur, and according to his lights he has acted up to his obligations. But our present rulers don’t care to keep the suzerainty, don’t care for a vassal state outside our boundaries, and do care for economising rupees.”

“ But surely they must know——”

“ That they will throw Ashraf Ali into the arms of Ethiopia, and extend Scythian influence down to our very borders, thanks to the way in which Fath-ud-Din has been allowed practically to repudiate Sir Dugald Haigh’s treaty? Why, Georgie, that’s just the sort of thing these fellows never see until it comes to pass. Then they lament that the world is so dreadfully out of joint, and say it all springs from our ingrained suspiciousness.”

“ But, Dick, you wouldn’t countenance such a breach of faith? ”

“ No, I told Ashraf Ali so—told him he would hear

of my resignation first. Funny thing, isn't it, to take a man who knows the frontier as I do, and let him give five of the best years of his life to working for it night and day, and then to send a jack-in-office who has never seen it to reverse all he's done? It's a queer world, Georgie. But we'll retire with clean hands, at any rate, you and I, and taste the modest joys of the pensioned in a suburban flat, with a five-pound note at Christmas-time from Mab and her Commissioner to help us along."

Georgia could not trust herself to speak. She was holding Dick's hand in hers, and smoothing his coat-cuff industriously.

"Well, never say die!" he went on. "I may get a berth in some Colonial defence force yet, and from that giddy height we'll smile superior upon a jeering world, serenely conscious that we can do without the five-pound note."

At one time Georgia would not have lost a moment in reminding him that she could in any case return to the active practice of her profession, but now she would not even suggest to Dick that last humiliation of living upon his wife's earnings. Instead, she lifted his hand to her lips.

"We shan't mind poverty, dear. We shall have been true to our people, and besides, your resignation may save the frontier. It will come out why you retired, and when once the reason is known, public opinion will be roused, and the Government will have to return to the old policy, even though we may not be here to carry it out. But oh, Dick, how can you speak civilly to Mr Burgrave after this?"

"Why, Georgie, the difficulty would be to speak

uncivilly to him. The man is so wrapt up in his own greatness that he cannot imagine any one's venturing to differ from him. He sweeps on like a glacier, removing all obstacles by his mere passage. The stones and rocks and things get carried along too, you know, whether they like it or not, and when the glacier has done with them it dumps them down in a neat heap, that's all. Besides, we have to give Mab her chance."

"If Mab marries him, I have done with her," said Georgia, with conviction.

During the next fortnight the house was overrun by a horde of Christmas guests, who came from outlying forts and irrigation and telegraph stations to taste the joys of civilisation for three or four days, hurrying back like conscientious Cinderellas at a given moment, that the other man might have his turn. Mabel was immensely interested in these lads, who looked up to Dick with frank veneration, and sought for quiet talks with Georgia that they might tell her all their home news, and kept the house lively from early morning until their host reluctantly suggested that it was time for them to repair to their improvised bedrooms at night. Her interest did not go unrequited, for she had them all at her feet, regulating her favours so discreetly that none of them could complain that he was worse treated than his neighbour, and at the same time no one had undue cause for self-congratulation.

"I know you think I shall lose my head, Georgie," she said, on the evening of Christmas Day, when she and Georgia had left the men to their nightly

smoke ; “ and I really believe I should if it lasted. These boys are all so splendid. Each of them is a hero in the ordinary course of his day’s work, but he never thinks of it, and no one out here thinks of it, and at home no one even knows their names. How is it that all the men out here are so nice ? The women, as far as I have seen, are distinctly inferior.”

“ So sorry,” said Georgia humbly. “ Perhaps we were born so.”

“ Goose ! I didn’t mean you. I meant the ordinary Anglo-Indian woman. With so many delightful men about, she ought to be proportionately better than at home.”

“ Perhaps it’s just possible that the delightful men spoil her, Mab. What do you think ? ”

Mabel laughed consciously, as she reclined in a long chair, with her arms behind her head. “ You mean that I have deteriorated perceptibly already, I suppose ? But that must be the men’s fault. If their admiration is the right kind, it ought to elevate me, surely ? Now don’t say that I trade on their honest admiration to flatter my self-love. I’m sick of that sort of thing. Besides, it’s a pleasure to them to admire me, and I consider that it does them good. I am a liberal education for them.”

“ How nice it must be to feel that ! ”

“ Yes, and I really am awfully fond of them, every one. I should like them all to win to-morrow. I can’t bear the thought that only one or two of them can get prizes ; I shall feel so unfair. Georgie, what are you going to wear ? Oh—” she sat up suddenly, with eyes wide with horror, “ what a

wretch I am! Georgie, I never remembered your dresses when I was so busy getting my own. I haven't brought you a single one."

"I guessed that some days ago," said Georgia.

"Oh, how wicked of me! Take one of mine, Georgie—any of them—even the muslin. I deserve it."

"I should look like a death's head at a feast, indeed! Nonsense, Mab! I shall wear my red and white foulard."

"The one I sent you out two years ago? Oh, it will be too dreadful! Sleeves and everything have altered since then. Besides, every one will know it."

"What does that signify? It is quite fresh, and suits me very well. No one will remember it—not even Dick."

But in this Georgia was mistaken. When she appeared the next morning, her husband looked suspiciously from her to Mabel.

"Didn't you wear that dress last year, Georgie? I thought you were going to get a new one. Why don't you have something floppy and frilly, like Mab?"

"Mab is a perfect dream," said Georgia. "No amount of trains or fichus could make me look like her. You are very ungrateful, Dick. Who ever heard of a man's quarrelling with his wife before for saving him a dressmaker's bill?"

"I've a good mind to telegraph home at once," grumbled Dick.

"But what good would that be for to-day? Never mind. I'll get something terribly elaborate for next Christmas."

"Oh, Georgie, how good of you not to give me away!" murmured Mabel, as Dick went out, grumbling, to see whether the dogcart was ready. "But I can't help being glad you didn't take this gown. I don't think I could have given it up."

CHAPTER IV.

THE OUTSIDER.

“ HAVE you heard the latest, Miss North ? ” asked Fitz Anstruther, as he escorted Mabel to the scene of action. The five men who were staying in the house had nearly come to blows in deciding who ought to enjoy this privilege, but Fitz had stepped in and disappointed them all equally by the calm announcement that it was his by right. Officially he was Major North’s deputy, and it was only fair that the pleasures as well as the duties of the post should devolve upon him. The justice of the contention was grudgingly admitted, and Fitz was the proudest man in Alibad when he drove to the ground that morning in his smart new buggy, with Mabel, the glories of her gown hidden by a tussore dust-cloak, seated beside him.

“ No. What has the Commissioner done now ? ” she asked.

“ Bahram Khan has entered his name for the Keeling Cup ! ”

“ And that is equivalent to saying that the sky has fallen ? ”

Fitz regarded her pityingly. “ You don’t see it as we do,” he said. “ Wait until you have been out

a little longer. It seems that in order to cement the reconciliation he has brought about, the Commissioner saw fit to invite the Nalapur Princes to honour us with their presence to-day. The Amir and Bahadar Shah didn't quite see themselves figuring in the triumphal procession, and both discovered that they had urgent business at home. But Bahram Khan duly turned up last night with his train of attendants, and is condescending enough to join us in our sports to-day. The Commissioner has a theory that in such mimic warfare as this the fusion of the English and native races proceeds apace, and Bahram Khan is doing his best to gratify him by poking himself into the race for the Keeling Cup—our very tiptop, crack, *pucca* event ! ”

“ But did General Keeling patronise races ? I shouldn't have thought they were at all in his line.”

“ They were not ; but then, this isn't a race in the ordinary sense of the word. It was first run just at the time when everything in Khemistan was named after him, and besides, it recalls one of his own pet dodges. They say that he used to subject the men that wanted to serve under him to pretty severe tests, and this was one of them. He used to rouse them up in the middle of the night, and they had to turn out without boots, catch a strange horse, and ride him round the town without a saddle, and with only a halter for a bridle.”

“ It's to be hoped that the town was smaller in those days than now ? ”

“ Of course it was, but we don't exact such a test as that. The ponies are all turned loose on the course without saddles, and the men, in slippers,

have to catch them and mount. Any man who catches his own is disqualified. Then they have to get them round the course without bridle or whip of any kind. I have noticed that the spectators are always pretty nearly dead with laughing before the end, while the competitors get black in the face with restrained emotion."

"But you don't mean that General Keeling really treated his officers in that way?"

"I do indeed. He had to weed them out, you see, or he would have been overrun with volunteers. Oh, you may have full confidence in my veracity, Miss North, even though I once had a report returned me by a jealous Secretary with the remark that I should do well to quit the Civil Service for the path of romantic fiction. The pains I took over that report! You see, I had an inkling that it would be seen by a very exalted person, who is great on us juniors cultivating a literary style in our official writings. I can truly say that there has never been such a literary gem sent in since Macaulay left India. It was written in the most beautiful English—though I say it—full of tender touches and delicate conceits, and as to quotations, and Oriental imagery, and wealth of imaginative detail—! Ah well, it's better not to think of it," and Fitz sighed deeply.

"Why? Did it bring down upon you a rebuke from the Great Great One?"

"No, alas! for it never reached him. The Secretary intercepted it, naturally enough. Who would ever have looked at his minutes again after it? But at least it furnished him with an ideal to strive after.

I have reason to believe he is in a lunatic asylum at this moment. The effort was too great, you see."

"That was rather close," said Mabel irrelevantly, as the wheel shaved the basketwork tray of an itinerant sweetseller by the roadside.

"He shouldn't be so intent on his prospective gains. Look how many of the fellows there are about! That shows we are near the ground. They flock to this place from all quarters when they know there's a *tamasha* on."

They had reached the enclosure by this time, and Mabel found herself surrounded by an admiring throng. Pale-faced ladies from other stations glanced at her dress casually, and continued to gaze long and fixedly, her Alibad admirers brought up friends to be introduced, and both the old slaves and the new displayed a keen anxiety to post themselves for the day in the neighbourhood of her chair. With the exception of the race for the Keeling Cup, the sports were wholly military in character, and the programme was a lengthy one, but Mabel did not find the hours pass slowly. Everything was new and interesting, from the splendid native officers, with fierce eyes gleaming under enormous turbans, who dashed up on fiery steeds and bore away triumphantly an unresisting tent-peg, to the latest recruit who exhibited his coolness by holding out his bare hand, with what Mabel considered privately an excess of confidence, for his *daffadar* to cut a lemon upon it. There was the inner circle of troopers of the Khemistan Horse, reinforced to-day by such veterans as old Ismail Bakhsh and his fellow-*chaprasis*,

keenly critical, but above all things solicitous for the honour of the regiment. There were the notables of the district, grave and bearded men in flowing robes, who looked as though they might have sat for a gallery of Scriptural portraits, but who exhibited an anxious deference when Dick glanced their way, which suggested that their relation with him in the past had occasionally been that of criminals and judge. At the further side of the course was the motley throng of dwellers in the native town, and hangers-on of the cantonments, with faces of every shade of brown, and clothes and turbans of every variety of colour. And lastly, close at hand, there was the little group of English, not taking their pleasure sadly, for once, but making the most of the rare opportunity for the exchange of news and opinions. The Commissioner was the centre of attraction here, naturally enough, or, at least, he shared the general attention with Mabel; but she was quite aware, as she met his benevolent smile, that he was making her a graceful present of a portion of the homage due to himself.

The last event but one upon the programme was the tug-of-war between six men of the Khemistan Horse and six of the Sikhs who formed the Commissioner's escort—a contest which was fought out with the greatest obstinacy, but in which the visiting team finally secured the victory, to the unconcealed lamentation and resentment of the local representatives and their friends. The triumphant Sikhs found no sympathisers except among the *sahib-log*, and the English applause was cut short

by the necessity of preparing for the last race, in which it was a point of honour for every man to take part who could possibly do so.

"A solemn sacrifice to the memory of the adored General Keeling!" said Mr Burgrave in a low voice to Mabel, as they watched their late companions assembling upon the course.

"Oh, but what is that native doing?" cried Mabel, forgetting what she had heard only that morning, as a tall lithe man, wearing the green turban of a descendant of the Prophet, stepped out from the group of notables and joined the competitors.

"That," was the bland answer, "is Bahram Khan, hitherto the bugbear of the frontier, henceforth, I hope, our friend and ally."

"I don't like to see him there. He spoils the look of it," she said impulsively.

"Bahram Khan offends your eye? Ah, Miss North, you must pardon a poor statesman the dullness of his perceptions! I am no authority upon æsthetic questions, I must confess, whereas you—well, you could scarcely not be one."

A smile emphasized the compliment, and Mabel turned away rather hastily, and addressed a casual remark to Flora Graham. Compliments were all very well, but she did not approve of the adroit way in which Mr Burgrave repressed her whenever she touched on political subjects. Flora had no eyes for any one but Fred Haycraft at the moment, however, and Mabel was obliged to turn her attention to the course. The signal for starting was given just then, and there ensued a wild *mêlée* of men and

horses, the men as eager to mount as the horses were determined not to be mounted by any one but their own masters. Presently one or two successful athletes forced their way out of the scrimmage, and by degrees most of the competitors secured a mount of some kind, but some were still vainly struggling when the foremost appeared round the curve of the course.

“Oh dear, he has no chance!” wailed Flora, referring to her *fiancé*, who was one of these unfortunates. “That’s Bahram Khan’s pony he has got, and of course it won’t let a white man mount it. Well, every one must see that it isn’t his fault. Oh, he’s up at last!”

But this tardy triumph was of little avail, for just as Fred Haycraft urged his unwilling steed on its way, Bahram Khan, mounted on the bay pony which was the especial pride of Fitz Anstruther’s heart, trotted gently past the winning-post. The absence of hurry, as the luckless Fitz remarked afterwards, was at once the finest and the most irritating part of the performance.

“The nigger’s won!” remarked a grizzled old officer who had served under General Keeling, in blank amazement, and as the truth of his words broke upon those around him, they were received with a low whistle of dismay. The Commissioner, who had himself led the applause in which the rest were too much stunned to join, glanced round sharply, and at the same moment Mabel found Dick at her side.

“Look here, Mab. You’d better ask the Commissioner to give the prizes. I never thought of

this. These fellows are not like us—they don't understand things. Get into a back seat quickly, without any fuss."

Mabel stared at him blankly. She was to relinquish her part in the events of the day, the glorious hour to which she had been looking forward for more than a week, to disappoint all her admirers, and hide herself and her gown where no one could see them! But Dick's face was adamant, and he repeated his order peremptorily, until she rose and moved reluctantly towards the Commissioner, touching him on the arm.

"My brother says I had better ask you to distribute the prizes," she said, with disappointment in every tone. Mr Burgrave looked at her in astonishment, then his face took a harder set as his eyes fell on Georgia, who was endeavouring to console Flora for her lover's ill success. Of course it was her doing! A faded woman in a gown that might have been new two seasons ago—how could she be otherwise than jealous of the radiant vision at his side? "And no wonder, poor thing!" said Mr Burgrave to himself, with contemptuous pity, but she must learn that it would not do to make mischief where her beautiful young sister-in-law was concerned.

"My dear Miss North," the Commissioner's voice took on its most fatherly tone, "don't be afraid. Nothing would induce me to rob you of your pleasure."

The words were loud enough for Dick to hear, and Mabel saw him frown angrily as she returned to her place, half-proud and half-afraid of her triumph.

He said nothing, however, but took his stand immediately behind her, the very embodiment of silent displeasure. The sense of his disapproval served to irritate her further, and she heartily wished him away. His rigid face would quite spoil the effect of the picture she had intended to present, and he was taking up the room of other people whose attendance she would have preferred. But she was determined not to give in, even when the Commissioner's encouraging smile smote her with a feeling of treachery, in that she had appealed to him against Dick.

The regimental prize-winners came up in their order, the natives, now that the momentary excitement was over, wearing a look of stately boredom, which seemed to declare that sports and prizes alike were a species of child's play, in which they took part merely to humour the unaccountable whims of their officers. With the officers it was different, for Mabel read in their faces that although sports were good, and to earn a prize was better, both these faded into insignificance compared with the joy of receiving that prize from her hand. This was the very feeling that it most pleased her to inspire, and she loved the "boys," as she called them in her thoughts, better than before, if that were possible.

But this glow of pleasure was shortlived. A brief pause followed the appearance of the Sikh headman to receive the tug-of-war prize, and Mabel felt, without turning her head, that Dick's silent disapproval had infected all the Englishmen around. Once more she hardened her heart. It was detestable to see this wretched racial snobbishness in the

men she had admired so much. They would have liked to spoil the whole affair, and deprive her of the one piece of romance which had come to brighten the humdrum proceedings, rather than allow a native not belonging to the regiment to carry off a prize. She, at least, was above such petty considerations, and Bahram Khan should receive as gracious a smile as any of his fellow-competitors. One other person was of her mind, she saw, for the Commissioner clapped his hands lightly, and with infinite condescension, as Bahram Khan swaggered up. Mabel stepped forward, and met the glance of the bold eyes under the green turban. As she did so, she understood suddenly the secret of Dick's displeasure. The smile faded from her lips, and the hand in which she held the Keeling Cup trembled. She stopped and faltered, and her pause of distress was evident to the men behind her. How they responded to her mute appeal she could not tell, but the look of insolent admiration disappeared from Bahram Khan's eyes, into which she was still gazing spell-bound, and was, as it were, veiled under his former expression of contemptuous indifference towards his surroundings. A few words from the Commissioner, and the Nalapur Prince retired, leaving behind him a general feeling of awkwardness. If it had been arranged that anything else was to be done at this point, no one remembered it. People stood about in little groups, and talked somewhat constrainedly. Something had happened, or rather, there had been an electrical instant, and something might have happened, but it was not quite easy to see what it was. The crudest conception of the

facts was voiced by Mrs Hardy, who had torn herself from her school-work to be present at the prize-giving, and now seized upon Georgia.

“Oh, dear Mrs North, how unspeakably painful all this must be to you and your husband! You must feel the charge of Miss North a dreadful responsibility. I would never have said a word while she flirted merely with our own officers, or even with Mr Burgrave—though really the lengths to which she goes—! But to set herself deliberately to dazzle a native——”

“Mrs Hardy,” cried Georgia, flushing angrily, “please remember that you are speaking of my sister. I am certain that Mabel has never dreamt of such a thing. She may be thoughtless, but that is all.”

“It is very sweet and good of you to say it, but I am afraid your eyes will soon be disagreeably opened. No rational being could doubt that Miss North is setting her cap at the Commissioner, and that would hardly be a match you could welcome, would it? Look at her dress—so absurdly unsuitable at her age. Oh, I know to a day how old she is, Mrs North, and I will say that eight years between you don’t warrant your dressing as if you were mother and daughter. But I grant that Miss North is one of the people who always look younger than they are, while you invariably look older.”

The expression of Mrs Hardy’s sympathy rarely corresponded with the goodwill which prompted it, but Georgia received the stab in heroic silence, and cast about for some means of changing the subject.

“ I suppose we may as well go home now,” she said at last in despair, rising as she spoke. “ Where is my husband, I wonder ? ”

“ Over there, talking to the Commissioner and Bahram Khan,” responded Mrs Hardy. “ Dear me ! something must have happened. There is a messenger who seems to have brought some news. How grave they all look ! What can it be ? ”

Watching eagerly, they saw Bahram Khan take his leave of Mr Burgrave and Dick and rejoin his friends. As the two gentlemen returned to the rest of the company the Commissioner said, slightly raising his tones in a way that attracted general attention, “ Well, except for the sake of the poor fellow himself, I can’t pretend to be sorry. The way is now clear for important developments.”

Dick’s reply was inaudible, but the Commissioner rejoined sharply, “ Of course you put this down to Bahram Khan’s account ? ”

“ I make no accusations,” said Dick, unmoved. “ You can’t perceive more clearly than I do that it’s impossible to connect him with it.”

“ You deal in ambiguities, I see.” Mr Burgrave’s temper was evidently ruffled.

“ There is no ambiguity in my mind,” was the reply, as Dick beckoned to a servant to fetch up his dogcart. “ Are you coming with me, Georgie, or shall I take Mabel ? ”

“ Oh no, Mr Anstruther will drive her home,” said Georgia, aghast at the thought of an encounter between Dick in his present mood and Mabel at her prickliest. “ Dick,” as the Commissioner turned to speak to Mrs Hardy, “ what has happened ? ”

“ Hush ! speak lower. Bahadar Shah is dead.”

“ What ! poisoned ? ”

“ No, shot. He was out hunting, and one of his most trusted servants was carrying his spare gun loaded. As he handed it to him it went off, and Bahadar Shah was shot through the heart.”

“ And what happened to the servant ? ”

“ The rest fell upon him and clubbed him to death immediately.”

“ But of course it was Bahram Khan’s doing ? ”

“ ‘Sh ! He has established a satisfactory alibi, at any rate.” Dick helped Georgia into the cart and took the reins, and they were well on the road home before he spoke again. “ It is the killing of the servant that’s the most suspicious feature to me. It would be just like Bahram Khan to bribe him to murder his master on the understanding that his escape should be secured, and then to make matters safe by bribing the rest to put him out of the way.”

“ But surely that would only involve admitting more into the secret ? ”

“ What secret ? Bahram Khan is anxious for his cousin’s safety, and charges the servants to show no mercy to any one that attacks him. The utmost you could prove against him would be an idea that an attempt on his life might be made—not even a guilty knowledge, far less instigation.”

“ How did he receive the news ? ”

“ In the most orthodox way, deep but restrained grief. He must go to Nalapur to be present at the funeral and comfort his bereaved uncle, he told Burgrave, just as if his uncle would not sooner see

a man-eater come to comfort him. How Burgrave received the news, you heard."

"Yes. His manner was indecently callous, I thought."

"Oh no. His saying what he did was one of his calculated indiscretions, like unveiling his policy to Timson coming up. No papers here, you see, so he must make his revelations by word of mouth. Ugh! the man turns me sick. Did you notice his bit of by-play with Mab?"

"She didn't realise what you meant, Dick. Things here are so new to her, you know."

"Oh, why should a man be doomed to have a fool for a sister? If I had said to you what I said to her you would have understood."

"Perhaps Mab hasn't studied you as closely as I have."

"No, the Commissioner is her object of study at present. Nice cheerful prospect, isn't it—to have that chap for a brother-in-law?"

"Ye-es," said Georgia hesitatingly, "but I'm not quite sure it will be that, Dick. I think there's some one else."

"And the Commissioner is only making the pace for him? No, no, Georgie; that's a little too thick. Of course I know there are dozens of others, but who is there that has a chance against Burgrave?"

"If I tell you, you'll only laugh. It is a very little thing, but it's the straw to show which way the wind is blowing. You didn't notice, when Bahram Khan had had his prize, how Mab was left sitting alone for a minute. I knew just how she felt, ashamed and miserable and *wounded*, and

I wanted to go to her, but Mrs Hardy had got hold of me, and I didn't think she would improve matters. The Commissioner didn't see—he never does see what other people are feeling, unless he happens to be feeling the same himself—but Fitz Anstruther did. He was by her side in a moment, saying just the kind of things that would lead her to forget her mortification. If he had seemed to intend to help her, she would have been angry, but it looked quite accidental, as if it was simply that he took pleasure in her society, and jumped at the chance of enjoying it when he found her alone for a minute. She will be grateful to him ever after, and that may be the beginning of even better things."

"Oh, you match-makers! The idea of coupling Mab and Anstruther, of all people! And you back him against the Commissioner?"

"I do; unless Mab is deliberately playing for a high official future."

CHAPTER V.

ROSE OF THE WORLD.

“ AWFULLY sorry, Mab, but I really can’t ride with you this morning. It’s bad enough when one of our wandering tribes comes in for a palaver, but to-day there are two of them, at daggers drawn with one another. They have both sent deputations to inform me that I am their father and their mother, and will I be good enough to pulverise the other lot? That means that I have a nice long day’s work cut out for me.”

“ Oh, what a bother ! ” grumbled Mabel. “ And Georgia has got a lot of dreadful women in the surgery, and is doctoring them all round. How can she bear to have them about? Do you like having an M.D. for a wife, Dick ? ”

“ Personally,” said Dick solemnly, “ I rather do ; since Georgia is that M.D. Politically, it’s the making of me.”

“ No ; really ? ”

“ Rather ! Every woman of all these nomadic tribes has a stake in the country, so to speak—a personal interest in the maintenance of the system of government which has stuck Georgie and me down here. No Sarkar, no doctor ; that’s the way they look at it.”

“ Well,” said Mabel, somewhat ashamed, “ if it wasn’t that I have my habit on, I would stay and help her. But we are going to try Laili, Dick, and you promised faithfully to come.”

“ I know ; it’s horribly rough on you. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll spare Anstruther to you for the morning, and he must ride out to me after lunch. Don’t break his neck first, mind.”

“ But will it be safe for you to go alone ? Aren’t you afraid ? ”

“ Shade of my mighty father-in-law ! afraid of what ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t know. It sounds the sort of thing——”

“ That one would naturally be afraid of ? No, I would rather face any number of excited tribesmen than Burgrave at his blandest. I’ll send a *chit* down to Anstruther, and he’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Mabel had not long to wait. She was still standing on the verandah, flicking her dainty riding-boot with her whip, and feasting her eyes on the satin skin of the beautiful little black mare which was being led up and down by the groom, when Fitz came trotting up the drive.

“ Awfully good of the Major to lend me out this morning, Miss North ! Is that the new pony ? She ought to be a flier.”

“ Yes, isn’t she a little beauty ? I want to test her paces to-day. I have had enough of riding her about the roads. She’s all right there, but I should like to try her in a good gallop out in the desert.”

“ Out in the desert ? ” repeated Fitz, as he gathered up the reins and handed them to Mabel after mounting her. “ Well, I don’t suppose there’s any reason why we shouldn’t. If you don’t mind stopping a second at my place I’ll put a revolver in my pocket, and then we shall be all right.”

“ Why, what could there be to hurt us ? ”

“ We might happen upon a leopard, or something of the sort. It’s not likely, but there’s no harm in being prepared. We have a sort of fashion here of not going much beyond our own bounds unarmed.”

Mabel made no further objection, and after calling at Fitz’s quarters they rode out into the desert. Laili’s paces were perfect, and as often as Mabel raced her against Fitz’s pony she won easily. It was a clear, cold morning, really cold, as is often the case early on a winter’s day in Khemistan, and horses and riders alike seemed to be possessed of tireless energy. The two grooms, to whom the cold was a highly disagreeable experience, were left behind again and again, and remembered only when they had become mere dots on the horizon, so that it involved some waiting before they could come up.

“ Now let us race again ! ” cried Mabel, when she and Fitz had reluctantly walked their horses for some distance to allow the men to approach them.

“ All right. I say, there’s a jerboa ! Let’s chase him ! ”

“ Oh, do. I should so like to have one for a pet,” cried Mabel.

It seemed, however, that the jerboa preferred freedom to captivity, even with Mabel as gaoler, for

it was gone in a moment, getting over the ground in tremendous leaps at a pace which taxed the horses sorely to keep up with it.

“ Oh, it's getting away ! ” lamented Mabel.

“ Perhaps I can manage to wing him from here, ” said Fitz, bringing out his revolver. “ We could easily patch up a broken leg. Steady, Sheikh, old boy ! ”

The pace was fast and the ground rough, and it was scarcely surprising that the jerboa escaped unscathed, but Fitz's shot had an effect that he had not anticipated. At the sound Mabel's little mare stopped dead with a suddenness which jerked the rider's foot from the stirrup and nearly threw her out of the saddle, then took the bit in her teeth and dashed away in a frenzy of terror. Pull as she might, Mabel could not stop her, nor could she get her foot again into the stirrup. The horror of that wild rush through the whirling sand-clouds, with the wind shrieking in her ears, was such as she could never have imagined. Certain destruction seemed to be before her, for Laili was heading straight for the rocky ground at the foot of the mountains, where there was no hope that she would be able to keep her footing. Mabel was dimly conscious that she ought to come to some decision, or at least to select a moment at which to throw herself off, but all her powers seemed to be concentrated in the effort to pull up, or at any rate to turn the pony's head towards the open desert. As it was, Laili made the decision for her. An isolated rock, revealed unexpectedly by a lull in the wind, which caused the drifting sand to settle for a moment,

stood on the left hand of the course she was taking, and catching sight of it, she swerved away so violently that Mabel found herself all at once in a sitting position upon the sand. There she remained, too much dazed to make any attempt to rise, until Fitz swept up, and flung himself recklessly from his horse, which promptly continued the chase of the runaway on its own account.

“ Oh, thank God you are not killed ! ” he cried brokenly to Mabel, his sunburnt face ghastly pale. “ But you are frightfully hurt ! What is it—your back ? Oh, for Heaven’s sake, Miss North, try to move ! Is your leg broken ? Don’t say it’s your back ! ”

Mabel repressed a weak desire to laugh. “ I—I think I’m sitting here because you haven’t offered to help me up,” she replied, as well as her chattering teeth would let her.

He helped her up in silence, and began mechanically to brush the dust from her habit with shaking hands. When at last he looked up at her, Mabel saw that his lips were still trembling, and his eyes full of horror.

“ Oh, don’t look like that about me ! ” she cried impulsively. “ I’m not worth it.”

“ Not worth it ? ” he cried violently, then, controlling himself with an effort, he made a fair attempt at a laugh. “ If anything had happened to you, I should never have dared to face the Major and Mrs North again,” he said. “ Or rather, I could not have faced my own thoughts.”

“ But why ? ” asked Mabel, mystified.

“ Because it was all my fault for firing that shot

—wretched thoughtless *beast* that I am! I would have blown my brains out.”

“Now that is wicked,” said Mabel with decision, “and foolish too. But if you are going to talk in this agitating way, I think I should like to sit down in the shade over there. I feel rather shaky still.”

“I’m an unfeeling idiot! Lean on me, please.”

He supported her gently across the intervening space, and found a seat for her on a fragment of rock, in a nook which furnished a partial shelter from the sun and the whirling sand. She made room for him beside her, but he persisted in tramping up and down, his face twitching painfully.

“I can’t stay quiet!” he cried, in answer to her remonstrance. “When I think it’s just a chance—a mercy, Mrs North would say—that you’re not—not—” he skipped the word—“at this moment, it knocks me over. And all my fault!”

Mabel’s renewed protest was cut short by the appearance of the two grooms, who ran up with scared faces, and inquired dolefully which way the horses had gone, and whether the Presences would wait where they were until the missing steeds had been captured and brought back.

“Why, what else should we do?” asked Fitz, calm enough now in the presence of the alien race. His own groom hastened to reply that Dera Gul, the ancestral stronghold of Bahram Khan, was only a bow-shot off, and that there the Presences might find rest and refreshment.

“Not if I know it!” was Fitz’s mental comment. “It’s a blessing that the principal villain himself

is away at Nalapur, but we won't trespass on the hospitality of his vassals in his absence. We will wait here," he added to the servant, who replied sullenly that his honour's words were law, and departed with his companion in search of the horses.

"What was he saying?" asked Mabel curiously.

"Oh, only gassing a little about the neighbourhood," replied Fitz, who had had time to decide that he would not alarm his charge by telling her exactly where they were. It did not occur to him that the uneasiness with which Bahram Khan's glance had inspired Mabel three days before had resolved itself into a sense of offended pride at what she took to be a premeditated insult, and that no idea of any danger to herself personally had ever entered her mind. He did his best, therefore, to divert her thoughts from the question of the locality, and was congratulating himself upon his success when a little procession appeared round the corner of the cliff in whose shadow they were sitting. The principal figure was a sleek and shining Hindu, swathed in voluminous draperies of white muslin, with occasional glimpses of red brocade, who advanced with profound obeisances, and entreated the exalted personages before him to honour his master's roof by deigning to rest under it until their horses were found. This time Fitz could not but refer the suggestion to Mabel, and he found to his surprise that she was inclined to accept it.

"I shouldn't care to meet Bahram Khan," she said; "but he is away, you say."

"When did the Prince start for Nalapur?" asked Fitz of the Hindu.

“ Three days past, sahib—the same evening that he was present at the *tamasha* at Alibad.”

“ There ! ” said Mabel, “ you see it’s all right. My hair is full of sand, and it is so hot here. One never knows what to wear in this climate. I don’t believe I shall be able to ride all that way back unless I can rest in a cool place for a little first.”

“ I am pretty sure Major North wouldn’t like it,” said Fitz doubtfully.

The Hindu caught the purport of the words, and his countenance assumed an expression of the deepest woe. “ It is the sad misfortune of the illustrious prince that Nāth Sahib has ever looked upon him with disfavour,” he lamented.

“ Oh dear ! ” remarked Mabel, when the words were translated to her ; “ it will be dreadful if these people get the idea that Dick has a causeless prejudice against Bahram Khan. We had much better show confidence in him by going to his house. Who knows ? It may be the beginning of better things.”

“ I shouldn’t like to take the responsibility,” began Fitz, but she cut him short.

“ Very well ; I will take it, then. I am sure Dick will be glad if we can bring about a better understanding ; and I think it’s very inconsiderate of you to raise so many objections, when I have told you how hot and tired I am, and how I want a rest. It wasn’t my fault that we were stranded here, you know.”

This ungenerous use of the weapon forged by himself conquered Fitz, and he consented, reluctantly,

to accept the invitation brought by the Hindu. Mabel's smile of approval ought to have been a sufficient reward for his complaisance, but it was not, for he felt an uncomfortable certainty that Dick would object very strongly to the visit when he came to hear of it. The Hindu led the way with much bowing, and Fitz and Mabel followed him a short distance to the gateway of the fortress, which was situated on the farther side of the projecting cliff that had sheltered them. Two or three wild-looking men, apparently half asleep, were lounging about, but otherwise the place seemed to be deserted. The Hindu led them across the courtyard and up a flight of steps into a large cool hall, furnished solely with a carpeted divan and many cushions. Saying that sherbet and sweetmeats should be brought to them immediately, he left them alone, ostensibly to hasten the appearance of the refreshments. As he crossed the court, however, Fitz, watching him idly, saw him glance up to the ramparts. Here, to his astonishment, the young man perceived Bahram Khan himself beginning to descend the steps which led down into the yard. Mabel had also caught sight of the apparition, and Fitz's eyes met hers.

"The great thing is not to show any sign of fear," he said hastily.

"I'm not frightened," retorted Mabel; "but I'm not going to sit here to be stared at by that man. You must tell him that I have come to see the ladies of the house, whoever they may be."

"I daren't let you go into the zenana. Anything might happen there, and an army couldn't rescue you."

“But what could happen? You would keep Bahram Khan under your eye, of course. And you forget that his mother is one of Georgia’s patients. She will be delighted to see me.”

“Oh, that’s better, naturally. I will take up a strategic position in this corner of the divan, so that I can cover my host comfortably, without the risk of being seized from behind. But look here, won’t you take my revolver? I should hear if you fired a shot.”

“No, thanks. I did learn to shoot once, but if I fired now I’m afraid the result would be disastrous to myself alone. Besides, how could you rescue me without a weapon of any sort? I shall feel much safer with the revolver in your possession, for I am pretty sure you won’t leave the place without me.”

The last words were spoken as Bahram Khan entered the hall, and Fitz had no opportunity to reply. There was a suppressed excitement in the Prince’s manner which made him uneasy, and he begged at once that Mabel might bear the salutations of the doctor lady to the dwellers behind the curtain. Bahram Khan’s face fell, and although he protested that the honour shown to his household was overwhelming, it was fairly clear that no honour could well have been more unwelcome. The ladies had only just arrived, and had not yet settled down properly in their new quarters; they had had no opportunity of making fit preparation for so distinguished a visitor, and it was contrary to all the rules of etiquette that the doctor lady should despatch a messenger to visit them before they had sent their respects to her.

“Oh, very well, I won't make my call to-day,” said Mabel, rising, when Fitz had translated the long string of apologies that fell from the lips of the embarrassed host. “Then we may as well come, Mr Anstruther.”

But this was not what Bahram Khan desired, and after vainly endeavouring to persuade Mabel to sit down on the cushions again, he summoned a slave-boy, and ordered him to fetch Jehanara.

“There must be some one to interpret between the Miss Sahib and the women,” he explained, and Mabel wondered why Fitz looked so stern and so uncomfortable. Presently the curtain at the end of the room was shaken a little, and Bahram Khan rose and spoke in a low voice through it to the person behind. Then he beckoned to Mabel, the curtain was raised slightly, and she passed through, to find herself in a small dark antechamber. A stout woman in native dress stood there, with a great key in her hand, and unlocking a door, motioned her into a dim passage. It was so gloomy and mysterious that she was conscious of a moment's hesitation, but as soon as the door was shut the woman began to speak in English, as rapidly as if she was reciting a history she had learnt by heart. She spoke mincingly, and with a peculiar clipping accent which struck Mabel as disagreeable.

“Yes, Miss North, and I don't wonder you're surprised, I'm sure, to find me here, and as English as yourself. My poor papa was riding-master in a European regiment—none of your Black Horse—and my mamma was pure-blood Portuguese, and yet here I am.”

Even to the inexperienced eye the woman's own face, though seen only in the half-light, gave the lie to her claim of pure European descent; but Mabel had not yet acquired the Anglo-Indian's skill in distinguishing shades of colour, and did not care to dispute the assertion. Having taken breath, Jehanara went on—

“Yes, and I was educated at a real *pucca* boarding-school in the hills, Miss North—quite genteel, I assure you; one of the young ladies was the daughter of the Collector of Krishnaganj. And everything done so handsome—china-painting and making wax-flowers, and all the extras—no expense spared. I wish I could lay my hands on some of the rupees that were poured out like water on my education, I do. I should commence to astonish the people about here, I assure you, Miss North.”

“You must have found this life very trying at first,” murmured Mabel.

“Trying's no word for it, Miss North; it was just simply slavery. And I, that ought to be a princess, reduced to be treated like a common coolie woman, and thankful for that! Oh, I've been deceived shamefully, Miss North, and there is that makes allowances for me, and there is that doesn't; but submit to be downtrodden I won't be, not by any old black woman that calls herself a begum, nor yet by any fine gentleman officer that don't think me good enough to talk to his lady wife.”

Some instinct told Mabel that it would not be well to inquire too minutely into the means by which this waif of “gentility” had been stranded on such an inhospitable shore; and to cut short

the complaints, which threatened to become incoherent, she asked whether Jehanara knew her sister-in-law.

“ Yes, Miss North, I do, and a real lady she is—no thanks to her high and mighty sahib of a husband. Spoke to me polite, she did, the only time I’ve seen her, and gave me some English books and papers to pass the time away. Not like Mrs Hardy—there’s a sanctimonious old cat for you, Miss North, and no mistake, drawing her dress away from me, and talking at me as if I was the very scum of the earth ! ”

Mabel began to feel uncomfortable. Mrs Hardy’s judgments had not much weight with her, but it was evident that Dick had directed Georgia to hold no more intercourse with this person than civility required, and she thought it well to hint that her time was limited.

“ Oh, well, if you’re in such a hurry, Miss North, I’m sure I’m agreeable. A little talk with any one that’s English like myself is a treat I don’t often get, but I don’t desire to detain anybody to talk to me that doesn’t want to. The Begum will be ready to see you, I dare say.”

She led the way down the passage and into a low dull room looking into a small paved courtyard, from which similar rooms opened on the other three sides. Here were assembled some fifteen or twenty women and girls, who had evidently made use of the time since Jehanara had been summoned to the visitor in flinging on their best clothes over their ordinary garb. Robes of fine cloth, silk, or brocade showed treacherous glimpses here and there of coarse

cotton or woollen garments underneath, while the hair of the wearers was unplaited, and their eyelids innocent of colouring. They were not at all embarrassed, however, and crowded round Mabel with friendly interest; all but one, who lay huddled up upon a bedstead in the farthest corner, with her face to the wall, and refused even to look round. The chief person present was Bahram Khan's mother, who was known officially, from the name of her late husband, as the Hasrat Ali Begum, but whose personal title was the Moti-ul-Nissa, or Pearl of Women. She was an elderly woman, with a shrewd face showing considerable power, and she greeted Mabel with the kindness due to one who came from her friend the doctor lady, but also with a constraint which the visitor could not but recognise.

Presently a privileged attendant of the Moti-ul-Nissa's drew attention to the dusty state of Mabel's habit, and in explaining, with the aid of Jehanara, what had happened to her, she was able to awaken the sympathies of her audience. Ready hands brushed off the dust, a bowl of perfumed water was brought that she might bathe her sun-scorched face, and she was eagerly entreated to take down her hair and shake the sand out of it. Not quite liking the look of the comb held out to her, however, she contented herself with coiling her hair afresh, while an eager girl held a cracked hand-mirror, with a battered wooden back, at an angle that made it absolutely useless. The women were loud in their exclamations of wonder and delight at the sight of the soft fair hair, and presently Mabel became aware that the girl in the corner had raised herself

on her elbow, revealing a face beautiful in its outline, but now haggard and stained with tears, and was scowling at her with a look of unmistakable hatred.

“Is there some one ill in that corner?” she asked of Jehanara.

“No, Miss North, not ill—angry and sullen, that’s all.”

“Poor thing! in trouble, do you mean?” asked Mabel, rising and approaching the bed. The girl had turned away again when she saw that her glance was observed, and Mabel laid a hand upon her shoulder. “Can I do anything to help you?” she asked.

To her astonishment the girl shook off her hand as if it had been a snake, and springing up from the couch, burst into a torrent of vituperation. Her lithe young form shook with passion, her delicate hands were clenched, and her voice rose into a shrill scream. The other women strove in vain to quiet her, and Mabel’s efforts to disarm her anger were fruitless, but the storm ceased as suddenly as it had arisen. Breaking off in the midst of a furious sentence the girl threw up her arms in a gesture of utter despair, then dashed herself down again upon the bed, sobbing as though her heart would break.

“What is the matter with her?” asked Mabel, astounded and somewhat offended by this reception of her friendly overtures. “What does she say?”

Jehanara looked inquiringly at the Moti-ul-Nissa. A nod gave her permission to interpret, and she replied glibly—

“Why, Miss North, she says she hates you, that you’ve stolen away her husband with your airs and graces, and then come to gloat over her. You mustn’t mind what she says. It’s the way with these native women; they’re so sadly uncontrolled, you see.”

“But I haven’t stolen away her husband. Tell her so. What can she mean? Who is she?”

The other women, breathlessly interested, gathered round while Jehanara interpreted the answer to the girl, who sat up with streaming eyes, and poured forth a succession of fierce, abrupt sentences.

“She says, Miss North, ‘I am Zeynab, called Rose of the World, daughter of Fath-ud-Din, the King of Ethiopia’s Grand Vizier, and the fair-haired woman’—that’s you, Miss North—‘has stolen from me the heart of Bahram Khan, my lord. She has beguiled him to cast me off—me, Fath-ud-Din’s daughter—that she may have his house to herself, and now she comes to mock me. But let her beware. The witch Khadija was not my nurse for nothing, and if poison can disfigure, or steel kill, or fire burn, she shall pay every *anna* that she owes me.’ Don’t you go and take it to heart, Miss North; she’s a poor, wild, uneducated creature, not brought up like us.”

“But she must be mad!” cried Mabel. “Tell her she is making some extraordinary mistake; that I wouldn’t touch her husband with a pair of tongs—that I hate the very sight of him. Tell her that nothing would make me marry him if he was free, that my religion would forbid it; and as he is married already, our law forbids it. Tell her that

even if I wanted to marry him, my brother would see me dead first—that I would beg him to kill me before I stooped to such degradation.”

Even Jehanara cringed before Mabel in her crimson indignation, and translated her words without comment. The women looked at one another doubtfully, and the Moti-ul-Nissa frowned. The forsaken wife spoke again in bitter disdain—

“It is a fine thing to talk thus, when the fair-haired woman has robbed me of my lord’s heart for ever. Since she cares so little for it, why did she not leave it with Zeynab?”

“For anything that I have done, it is hers still,” said Mabel desperately. “Ask my sister, the doctor lady, if it is not so. You know her, all of you.”

“Ah, woe is me!” cried Zeynab. “Why did not the doctor lady leave me to die as a little child, rather than save me by her art that misery might come upon me through one of her own house?”

“Peace, girl!” said the Moti-ul-Nissa. “The doctor lady knows not yet that thou art my son’s wife. It is not through her that this trouble has come. I will send a message to her, that she may tell us what to do. If the words of her sister here are true words—” she broke off and looked keenly at Mabel—“it may be that she is one of those that ensnare men even without their own will; but such women ought not to place themselves where men are forced to behold them.”

Mabel digested the rebuke, translated with startling plainness by Jehanara, as well as she might. “I am very sorry,” she said in a low voice. “My brother said just the same to me, but I have only

been here a short time, and I didn't understand things. Please forgive me," she added, looking first at Zeynab and then at her mother-in-law. "I never dreamed that such a thing could happen, and I will take care that it never does again."

"Never again is too late for me," said Zeynab bitterly.

"Peace!" said the old lady again. "Is it nothing to thee that the doctor lady's sister has humbled herself before thee? Now it is for thee to win back thy lord as best thou mayest. And as for thee, Miss Sahib," added the Moti-ul-Nissa severely, "choose thee a husband quickly, since that is the custom of thy people, and see that he is such a man as will slay any other that casts his eyes upon thee."

"The Sahib desires the Miss Sahib to be told that the horses have been found, and all is ready," said the little slave-boy, pushing himself unbidden into the group, and Mabel wasted no time over her farewells.

"I really think I have never been so uncomfortable before!" she said to herself, as she got out of the room.

"Now you see, Miss North, what a trial it is to me to live among such coarse, ungentle creatures as these," said Jehanara.

CHAPTER VI.

LA BELLE ALLIANCE.

“ POOR dear Laili ! ” sighed Mabel, patting the dust-begrimed neck of the little mare. There was no fear of Laili’s running away now, although she had spirit enough left to struggle gamely through the sand, miles of which still stretched between her and home.

“ I don’t think she’ll be any the worse when she’s had a good rest and feed,” said Fitz consolingly.

“ Oh no, I hope not ! But I know Dick will never let me ride her again.”

“ Of course ; it really wouldn’t be safe. The regiment are so often at carbine practice, you know, and the tribesmen can’t come near the town without letting off their jezails to show their friends they have arrived. It’s quite an exception when a day passes without our hearing shots of some kind.”

“ I know. But she is such a beauty, I can’t bear to give her up.”

“ Look here, Miss North ; a bright idea ! Will you let me try to break her of this frivolous habit of hers ? I’m generally considered rather good with horses, and there’s nothing I should like better than to train her properly for you.”

“ Oh, could you really? Of course I have still got Majnûn, but he is so uninteresting to ride compared with her. But won't it give you a great deal of trouble? ”

“ Trouble? Not a bit! I wish it would. Then you might set it down as some sort of atonement for my carelessness in nearly getting you killed to-day. But anyhow, I'll do my best with her, honour bright! If the Major will give her stable-room to-night, I'll have a box cleared out for her at my place. My stables are crammed with ridiculous old rubbish that has come down to me from General Keeling's time, and my horses camp in the middle of it. By-the-bye, do you know I can't feel as I did about Sheikh there ”—he looked askance at his own handsome pony—“ since Bahram Khan won the cup on him? It seems as if he must be an awful traitor to sell his master in that style, you see. I distinctly saw the fellow whisper in his ear before he mounted him, and he was like a lamb at once, instead of flinging his heels all over the shop, as he had been doing the moment before. Now suppose he's been hypnotized once and for all, what's to happen if he chooses to trot off and attach himself to Bahram Khan any day we may chance to meet him? I shall look a nice sort of fool.”

“ Have Bahram Khan arrested for horse-stealing, I should think,” said Mabel, with a rather forced laugh. “ But how is it that that dreadful man is here at all? I hope you had a word or two with the Hindu who told us he was away? ”

“ Ah, but he had us there, unfortunately. Narayan Singh told us that his master had started for

Nalapur, but we didn't ask whether he had come back, so he wasn't obliged to say anything, and he didn't. Bahram Khan told me himself how it happens that he's here. It seems that when he got to Nalapur his uncle intimated that he could run the funeral without his assistance, and more than hinted, as I understand, that he had had too much to do with it already. Hence he thinks it well to hide his cousinly grief in his ancestral fortress, until he can get the Commissioner to tackle Ashraf Ali for him again, I suppose."

"More trouble!" sighed Mabel.

"I'm afraid so. The Kumpsioner Sahib is scarcely likely to take such a slap in the face quietly. His *protégé* has been snubbed, and I rather think he will want to know the reason why."

Mabel sighed again, and they spoke little after that, except to encourage the horses as they toiled through the loose sand. Arrived at the gate of the compound, she asked Fitz to come in and have some lunch, but he laughed.

"No lunch for me to-day, Miss North. I must tear home and get a fresh horse and ride out to the Major. You don't realise that I have taken a good bit of the afternoon off as well as the morning that he granted me, and that the wiggling I shall get is thoroughly well earned."

"I'll intercede for you the minute Dick comes in."

"Ah, it will have happened before that. But never mind; it's in a fair and honest cause—couldn't be in a fairer," added Fitz audaciously, as he rode off.

"I'm afraid that boy is going to be silly," said

Mabel solemnly to herself as she mounted the verandah steps ; but on catching sight of Georgia, all thought of Fitz and his foolishness faded from her mind.

“ Oh, Georgie, such a day of adventures ! I’ve been thrown, and I’ve paid a morning call on Bahram Khan and found him at home, and I’ve penetrated into the recesses of an Eastern harem, and I’ve been talked to more disagreeably than I ever was in my life.”

“ Mab ! ” was Georgia’s horrified exclamation, “ how could you ? How could Mr Anstruther let you ? Was the harem Bahram Khan’s ? ”

“ Yes, of course, and Mr Anstruther had no voice in the matter. I preferred to sit with the ladies rather than with their lord and master, naturally. And oh, Georgie ! Bahram Khan’s Ethiopian wife is your little Zeynab, Fath-ud-Din’s daughter, and she thinks—she thinks—I don’t know how to say it—she has got it into her head that I aspire to the honour of being the second Mrs Bahram Khan.”

“ Mab ! ” cried Georgia again, helplessly.

“ Yes, and there was a fearful yellow woman there who says she’s English——”

“ I know, that dreadful person Jehanara. Oh, Mab, Dick will be terribly angry when he knows you have been talking to her ! She is Bahram Khan’s evil genius—inspires all his plots first, and then helps him to carry them out. She came here once as his ambassadress, but Dick would have nothing to do with her, and forbade me to let her come into the house. You see, politicals have to be very jealous of any Europeans or Eurasians gaining influence

with native princes. And now she will make capital out of your having spoken to her."

"My dear Georgie, will you kindly tell me how I could help speaking to her when she was the only possible interpreter between the ladies and me? Really one might think I had arranged that all these horrid things should happen, when you know they were pure accidents. And you won't sympathise a bit, though I am almost out of my mind with worry. These women will believe you; tell them, assure them, swear to them, that I have no designs on Bahram Khan, for if they go on thinking I have, I don't know what I shall do."

"I can put that right, at any rate, but Dick will be so vexed——"

"Dick!" Mabel almost screamed. "Dick is to know nothing of this. Georgie, I absolutely forbid you to say a word to him about it. Isn't it enough for him to be always casting up against me what happened the other day, without having this to bother me about as well?"

"You must have a horribly guilty conscience, Mab. I'm sure Dick has never said a word to you about the other day."

"No, but he has looked it, again and again. And I will *not* have him told about this absurd fancy of poor jealous Zeynab's. You couldn't be so dishonourable, Georgie, as to tell your husband another person's secret against her will."

"I can't tell him if you forbid it, but I wish you would let me. Very likely it is some plot of Jehanara's to make the poor little wife miserable, but it

may have some political bearing, and I think he ought to know. Do let me tell him, Mab."

"No, you're not to. I shall never have the smallest confidence in you again if you do. It can't concern Dick or anybody but myself, and the only reason I told you was that you might use your influence with the women to make them see how silly the idea was. If you tell any one else about it, we shan't be friends any more."

Some four days later Georgia was returning home from afternoon tea at the Grahams'. She had left Mabel behind her to comfort Flora, whose *fiancé* had returned to his duties at Fort Shah Nawaz, and Dick had ridden across the frontier to settle a tribal dispute, and would not be back till late. Georgia felt tired and depressed, and visions of the couch in her own room, and the latest magazines that had reached Alibad, floated enticingly before her. As she drove up to the house, however, she caught a glimpse of a camel kneeling down to its meal, a heap of fodder piled on a piece of rough cloth, in the stable yard. One of the high hooded saddles used by native women of distinction lay near it, and two or three strange men were gossiping with the servants. The inference was obvious, and Georgia felt no surprise when her maid Rahah met her with the announcement that the Eye-of-the-Begum was waiting to see her. Mysterious as the words sounded, they referred only to the confidential attendant of the Moti-ul-Nissa, and the old woman was very soon established on the floor of Georgia's room. The curtain over the door, which served as a danger-

signal on these occasions, was drawn, and Rahah stationed outside it to warn Dick not to intrude when he returned, and the visitor was therefore able to lay aside her veil and make herself at home. As for Georgia, she had learnt by experience that however little a native might have to tell, he or she invariably displayed a misdirected ingenuity in lengthening out the telling of it, and she resigned herself to the loss of the quiet time she had anticipated, and made the customary polite inquiries with every sign of cordial interest. When these had been answered, and the Eye-of-the-Begum had duly asked after Mabel's health, and (in modest periphrases), after that of Dick, and delivered her mistress's *salaams* and good wishes to Georgia, paying a compliment in passing to her hostess's coffee and sweets, she prepared at last to approach the subject of business, but strictly in her own fashion.

"Many years ago, O doctor lady," she began, "a troop of robbers met a man leading a fine horse richly caparisoned. 'O brother, who art thou?' asked they. 'I am So-and-so, the servant of Such-an-one, and I am taking this horse to my master's son as a gift from his uncle,' he replied. Then they seized and carried off the horse, and beat the man, but let him go. But verily it was his fate to be unfortunate that day, for he fell in with a second troop of robbers, who also asked him who he was. 'Truly,' said he, 'I am So-and-so, the servant of Such-an-one, and I carry to my master's son as a gift from his father a gold chain which is concealed in my turban.' Now before this they had intended to kill him, but finding the chain, they took it and his

clothes, and bade him make haste to depart. Hiding by day and travelling by night, he accomplished the rest of his journey, and presented himself before his master's son, who, seeing a footsore man wearing only a ragged loincloth, asked him in astonishment who he was. 'Verily,' he said, 'I am So-and-so, the servant of Such-an-one, and I bring to my master's son the gift that his mother has sent him.' And thus saying, he took from his armpit the great pearl which is nowadays called the Mountain of Milk, which is among the treasures of the Amirs of Nalapur, having carried it safely through the country of the robbers. Then his master's son commanded that a robe of honour should be put upon him, and gave him a horse and arms."

"He thoroughly deserved them," said Georgia.

"True, O doctor lady. But thy servant is now as that messenger was. Here is my horse with the rich trappings," she held out an empty liniment bottle. "The pains which were banished by the medicine from my mistress's limbs have now returned, and she desires more of it. But of the gold chain concealed in the turban there is much to say, and even more of the great pearl hidden in the armpit, wherefore, O doctor lady, be wary lest there be any that can hear us."

Georgia rose obediently, and looked outside the windows, under the bed, and into the wardrobe. Having made it clear that there were no eavesdroppers about, she returned to her visitor.

"First, then, O doctor lady, thy servant will reveal the chain of gold. My mistress's son has looked upon the face of the Miss Sahib, thy lord's

sister, and his heart is hot with love of her. He has said to his mother, 'Get her for me to wife, for I cannot sleep by night nor eat by day for thinking of her.' "

"I am astonished that the Hasrat Ali Begum should venture to send such a message to me," said Georgia coldly, rising as she spoke, but the old woman caught at her dress.

"Nay, hear me out, O doctor lady. My mistress strove her utmost to dissuade her son, for truly it is not well for East to mate with West, nor Moslem with Christian, neither is it pleasant for her to think of a daughter-in-law who will desire to change everything in the zenana, and rule the whole house, because she is English. It is out of love for thee, O doctor lady, and for thy lord, who is just and fears no man, that my mistress speaks. For these were the words of Syad Bahram Khan, my mistress's son: 'Tell Nāth Sahib that if he will give me his sister, I desire no dowry with her, but only his friendship. Let him speak with my uncle to acknowledge me as his heir, and grant me the honours and dignities which by right belong to the Amir that is to be, and I will live in peace with them both, and strengthen them against all their enemies. Fath-ud-Din's daughter shall go back to her father's house, so that all men may see that I look no longer to Ethiopia for support, and that Nāth Sahib's sister shall have no rival in the zenana. And moreover, have I not found favour in the sight of Barkaraf Sahib, whose eye is evil against Nāth Sahib? If Nāth Sahib will make friends with me, I will speak for him to the Kumpsoner Sahib, so that he shall

look favourably upon him also, and the border will be at peace, and Nāth Sahib's praise in all men's mouths."

"Surely you must see for yourself that the idea is absurd?" said Georgia, trying to speak gently. "I can't be too thankful that Bahram Khan did not send a message direct to my husband. His wrath would have been——"

"That was Jehanara's advice, O doctor lady. She bade his Highness gather his followers and ride boldly with them to demand the Miss Sahib from thy lord. But my mistress, knowing that Nāth Sahib's hand is always ready, feared for her son, and spoke prudently to him: 'Nay, my son, do not so, or Nāth Sahib will think thee ignorant of the customs of thine own people, and intending an insult to his house. Rather let thy mother speak for thee, that all things may be done according to custom, and the maiden's relations not angered.'"

"And what about my poor little Zeynab?" asked Georgia. "What does she think of all these negotiations?"

"She is a fool," returned the old woman shortly. "When the Miss Sahib came into the zenana the other day, she was angry and reviled her, and the Miss Sahib was angry also, and bade Jehanara tell her that she would not so much as touch her lord with the staff of a lance. Now at this the foolish girl was comforted, but her jealousy was only laid to rest for a moment, and because her lord would not suffer her to come near him, and drove her away with bitter mockings, she taunted him in her rage with the Miss Sahib's words, so that he fell into

a terrible fury, and beat her, and tore off her jewels, hoping that she would return of her own will to her father's house."

"Brute!" murmured Georgia, with white lips. "But why didn't he divorce the poor child?"

"He would have done so, O doctor lady, had not Jehanara reminded him that if Nāth Sahib rejected his proffer of friendship, it would not be prudent for him to make himself enemies in Ethiopia. She desires to see thy lord humbled, O doctor lady, and she knows that the Vizier Fath-ud-Din hates him also. But the Lady Zeynab offered no resistance to her lord's treatment of her, dreading only lest he should send her from him."

"Upon my word!" cried Georgia. "I wish Bahram Khan had made his request to my husband in person. He would have deserved whatever he got."

The visitor sighed patiently. "Strange are thy ways, O doctor lady, after the manner of thy people! Why should it trouble thee that an Ethiopian woman is beaten by her husband, when thine own lord's fate is trembling in the balance? Think rather of him and of thyself than of this foolish girl. And now to come to the great pearl, even my message of messages, which is from the mouth of my mistress's brother, the Amir Ashraf Ali Khan. It is known to no one but his Highness's self and the wise and learned mullah Aziz-ud-Din, whom he sent on an errand to my mistress's son, but with this secret message for my mistress's own ear. These are the words of the Amir Sahib: 'Say to my friend Nāth Sahib, What is to be the end of these

things? Since thy first coming hither I have obeyed thy voice, as I did that of thy father-in-law, Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib, and all has gone well with me. I saw at my side my nephew Bahadar Shah, who was to me as a son, my Sardars brought their tribute at the due seasons, and the Ethiopians durst not cross my borders, while thy wisdom and justice settled all boundary disputes to the admiration of my wisest men. Now all this is changed. Bahadar Shah is gone from me, and Barkaraf Sahib orders me to receive in his stead the unnatural wretch who sought to slay me, his benefactor. Even now he rebukes me with great words because I would not suffer the mockery of his presence at the grave of him he slew. Speak then, O my friend, and let me know thy mind. Who is Barkaraf Sahib that he should thrust himself into the affairs of this border of mine and thine? He cannot speak our tongue nor judge according to our customs, and he never beheld the face of Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib Bahadar. Can it be that his presumption and the evil of his doings are known to the Sarkar? Wilt thou obtain leave for me to make a journey to the Court of the great Lord Sahib, or of the Empress herself, that there I may lay the truth before them? Or if the KumpSIONER Sahib stands in the way of this, then let me present a petition truthfully drawn up.' "

The ambassadress paused, but Georgia shook her head. "No, it would be no use," she said. "The KumpSIONER Sahib has the ear of the Sarkar, and he is given a free hand here."

"Is it so, O doctor lady? Then listen to the remaining words of Ashraf Ali Khan: 'Let Nāth

Sahib but say the word, and this border shall be no place for the Kumpsioner Sahib. Already my Sardars are murmuring against his doings, and the tribesmen's faces are black towards him because of his treatment of their friend. At a signal from me they will rise all along the border, and force the Kumpsioner Sahib to flee for his life, so that the Empress shall say, "Verily Barkaraf Sahib is no fit ruler for the men of Khemistan." But when he is gone, Nāth Sahib shall quell the rising without drawing a single sword, so that the Empress will send him a robe of honour and a state elephant, and name him ruler of Khemistan and the border for ever. Send back but one word through the mullah Aziz-ud-Din, whom I have despatched to quiet the complaints of my nephew with empty words and grudging gifts, in obedience to the Kumpsioner Sahib, and the thing is done.' "

"Oh no, no!" cried Georgia, "that must never be. A rising now would only work the ruin of my husband, and the Kumpsioner Sahib would be stronger than ever before. More than this, O Eye-of-the-Begum, such are not the ways of the English. Because the Kumpsioner Sahib is set over my husband, he is to be obeyed, and to conspire against him or plot for his disgrace would be in our eyes a deadly wrong. The matter is ended."

"So be it, O doctor lady. The hands of Ashraf Ali Khan are clean, and he has done what he could for his friend and for himself, but it was written that matters are not to be set right thus. And one word more: see that thy lord seek a husband

quickly for the Miss Sahib. Why does he not give her to the Dipty Sahib?" This was Fitz Anstruther, in his capacity of Dick's assistant or deputy. "He is young and well-spoken, and such a man as women love."

"I should like nothing better," said Georgia, with a sigh, "but I rather think the Miss Sahib will choose a husband for herself. And hark! I hear the Major Sahib returning. You will rest this night in the guest-house in the compound with your attendants?"

"Even so, O doctor lady, and in the morning I will return to Dera Gul with the medicine for my mistress, and with such words as the wisdom of the night may dispose thee and thy lord to send in answer to the Amir Sahib's message."

Georgia shook her head again sadly as she delivered the old woman into Rahah's charge, and having seen her safely out of the way, went to find Dick. He had just thrown off his heavy boots, and was lounging luxuriously in a long chair in his den.

"That you at last, Georgie? Come in, old girl. How has the world gone with you all day? I'm just comfortably tired, and at peace with all mankind. What's up? Some obstinate patient who *will* die, eh?"

"No, nothing of that kind. I have been interviewing a messenger from Dera Gul."

"Not that awful East Indian woman, I hope?" Dick raised himself suddenly.

"No; the Eye-of-the-Begum, with a very secret message from the Amir. He wants you to join with him to get rid of the Commissioner."

“ He does, does he ? I thought Burgrave’s last reprimand would wake him up a bit. He made it pretty clear that Bahram Khan was to be recognised as heir, and admitted to all the privileges of the post. It’s funny, isn’t it, that our respected superior doesn’t seem to see what a creepy sort of thing it is to welcome into your bosom a snake that’s tried to bite you already ? Oh, Georgie, it is calculated to make a man swear when he sees a fellow like Burgrave, who has far less knowledge of district work than young Anstruther, and that so long ago that he’s forgotten all about it, sent to upset a province where he doesn’t even know the languages, simply because he can write nice reports and is a favourite at Simla. I can’t make pretty speeches to exalted personages, but I can keep this frontier quiet, and they won’t let me do it.”

“ I know ; it’s perfectly shameful. But, Dick, I have something else to tell you that will make you laugh, though you won’t like it. Bahram Khan is anxious to marry Mab.”

Dick bounced out of his chair. “ The dirty hound ! It’s like his impudence to dare to dream of such a thing. He had better look out for the next time he comes across me. Why hadn’t he the pluck to bring his precious message himself ? ”

“ I think his mother fancied he would be safer at a distance. He is good enough to offer his friendship as a bait.”

“ Thanks, I’d rather be without it. The whole thing is a plot, Georgie—a palpable plot to try and get me into trouble with Burgrave. There was no hint of this atrocious idea when Mab was at Dera

Gul the other day, or we should have heard of it." Georgia felt uncomfortable, but her promise to Mabel kept her silent. "It's a clumsy trick devised on the spur of the moment. If I pretended to nibble at it, the next thing would be that Burgrave would be informed I was intriguing against him, and had offered my sister to Bahram Khan to attract him to my side. We are on the down-grade, Georgie. I didn't know they had got so far as inventing false accusations against me yet. Bah! it makes a man sick of the whole thing."

"I fancy Bahram Khan has had the idea in his mind longer than you imagine," Georgia ventured to say.

"Oh, you're a match-maker, as I've told you before. Please keep your planning to pleasanter subjects in future. But I say, it's rather fine that the Commissioner should have Bahram Khan for a rival! I should really like to tell him so."

"Then you still think Mr Burgrave is in love with Mab?"

"If he isn't, why does he stick on here so long without bringing off his great splash? He says it's because of the Christmas holidays, but a trifle like that wouldn't keep him quiet generally. My idea is that he means to make sure of her before breaking with me."

"But she would have nothing to do with him in any case if he broke with you."

"You think so? Well, we shall see."

CHAPTER VII.

NONE BUT THE BRAVE.

“REALLY, Mab,” said Dick irritably, “your horses are more bother than they are worth. Why don’t you set up a motor-car?”

“How horrid you are, Dick! Any one would think it was my fault that all these things happen. How could I help one of the other horses kicking Majnûn as they were coming back from watering? I am sure it was that wretched Bayard of yours—cross old thing! At any rate, the syce declares it’s impossible for Majnûn to go out to-day, and I can see it myself. You can go round and look at the state his leg is in.”

“Oh, all right; I’ll take your word for it. But what are you going to do?”

“The syce’s sole idea is to send down to Mr Anstruther’s for Laili, but I don’t care to ride her again just yet.”

“No, I certainly won’t have you mount her until Anstruther can give a better report of her proceedings. Well, you had better take Georgie’s old Simorgh, as she and I are to do Darby and Joan in the dogcart.”

“He’s so horribly and aggressively meek. I don’t

want a horse whose sole title to distinction is that in prehistoric days he carried his mistress to Kubbet-ul-Haj and back without once running away. I am going to ride Roy, Dick."

"My dear Mabel, pray have some regard for appearances. Will nothing but a mighty war-horse satisfy your aspiring mind?"

"That's just it. He's so big that it must feel like riding on an elephant. I should love to ride him, and you know it's perfectly safe. A child could manage him—you said so yourself."

"No, really, Mab. An appreciative country doesn't provide me with chargers merely to furnish a mount for you."

"Then I shall borrow a horse from somebody. Mr Burgrave would lend me anything he possesses in the way of horseflesh—he said so," declared Mabel vindictively.

"I daresay, and rejoice when it came to grief, so that he might nobly refuse any compensation. Oh, take Roy, and Bayard too, if you like, and make the whole show into a circus, but don't put me under an obligation to Burgrave."

Mabel retired triumphant, as she had intended to do. It was the last day of the Christmas holidays, and the Alibad festivities were to close, as usual, with a picnic organised by Major and Mrs North. Georgia had been up long before dawn, superintending the packing of provisions in the carts, which must set out as soon as it was light, and she was now resting in her own room. Without troubling to ask herself why, Mabel felt relieved by her absence. She would not have cared to employ the

argument with which she had vanquished Dick, had his wife been at hand, but she had no fear of his bearing malice or alluding to the matter afterwards. Perhaps he thought she was sufficiently punished already, for when she was perched upon the back of the great roan charger, she found that her victory was its own sole reward. Roy was almost as uncomfortable to ride as a camel, and to Mabel, accustomed to her docile ponies, he seemed to have no mouth at all. She was thankful to receive a hint or two on managing him from his forgiving master, and thus forearmed, she would not own herself defeated. Her mount excited a good deal of surprise among her fellow-guests, and Mr Hardy asked her benevolently if she would not have preferred an elephant, while Mr Burgrave reminded her in reproachful tones of his offer of the loan of any of his horses. To this she replied promptly that she preferred a military mount as more trustworthy, an answer which bred great, if somewhat causeless elation in the minds of several young officers who heard it.

The scene of the picnic was a spur of the mountains about a dozen miles to the north-east, where there were curious caves to be seen, and also the ruins of an ancient fortress, among which fragments, or even whole specimens, of old glazed tiles, very highly prized by those learned in such things, were sometimes found. On this occasion everything was done in the orthodox way. The caves were duly explored and the ruins examined, with suitable precautions against finding scorpions instead of tiles, and a few rather disappointing sherds were dis-

covered, and entrusted to the servants to take home. Mabel and Flora Graham chose to climb to the highest point of the ruins, escorted and assisted by all the younger men of the party, but when there they confessed that, but for being able to say they had achieved the ascent, they had gained nothing that was not equally obtainable down below. However, the provisions were excellent, and nothing material to their consumption had been forgotten, so that the guests all agreed that it had been a most successful picnic, and Georgia heaved a sigh of satisfaction as she watched the servants piling the last of the empty baskets on the carts.

These carts, with the three or four carriages which had conveyed the elder members of the party, were obliged to return home by the track across the plain, but it was possible for the riders to take a short cut through the hills for the first part of the way. While a discussion was going on as to the path to be chosen, Flora Graham moved close to Mabel.

“ Oh, Mab,” she murmured hastily, “ do you think you could get Mr Brendon to ride with you? He persists in sticking to me, and I know Fred won't like it when he hears. He's a little inclined to be jealous, you know, because once, before we were engaged, he thought I liked Mr Brendon. Besides, I want to ride with Mr Milton, and talk to him about Fred.”

Milton, the youth who was Fred Haycraft's comrade at Fort Shah Nawaz, had cheerfully put up with the fag-end of the holidays that his senior might enjoy as much of Miss Graham's society as

possible. He was delighted with the proposed arrangement, and Mabel had little difficulty in attaching Mr Brendon to herself when he found that the post he coveted was already bespoken. It was obvious, however, to keen-eyed observers that Mr Burchgrave and Fitz Anstruther had both been promising themselves the pleasure of riding with Mabel, and the sudden blankness of their faces when they found themselves forestalled by this outsider was much appreciated. Finally, either moved by a certain vague fellow-feeling, or each impelled by the determination to see that the other played fair, they fell in together behind Mabel and her cavalier, riding rather in advance of the rest.

As for Mabel, she felt it distinctly hard to be obliged to sacrifice herself in this way for Flora's benefit. Mr Brendon, of the Public Works Department, was a most estimable young man, but he suffered from a plethora of useful knowledge. To ask him a question was like pulling the string of a shower-bath, which let loose a flood of information on the head of the unwary questioner. Mabel had intended to let him prose as he liked, while she thought about other things, and jerked the string, so to speak, at the requisite intervals, but he was far too polite to monopolise the conversation. He paused for her replies or invited her opinion so often, while clearly ready to supply the needed answer himself, that she had not a moment for meditation, and found the ride almost unendurable. She had just succeeded in hiding an irrepressible yawn when a happy idea came to her as she was approaching a state of desperation.

“ Oh, here is quite a nice level piece of ground ! Let us race, Mr Brendon.”

He could not well refuse, and for all too short a time Roy pounded gallantly through the sand. Brendon's lighter steed won easily, and when Mabel reached the end of the course, she found him waiting for her. At this point their road entered a narrow ravine, leading down to the open desert, and the high rocks on either side looked black and threatening against the glowing sunset sky, a glimpse of which at the further end of the gorge dazzled the eyes.

“ I think you had better let me pilot you here, Miss North,” said Brendon. “ The ground is strewn with loose boulders, and it is difficult to distinguish them in this light. You might get a nasty fall.”

It was desirable that Brendon should ride anywhere rather than beside her, and Mabel accepted the position he assigned to her with something more than resignation. He took the lead as they entered the ravine, his pony picking its way with infinite caution, and Roy followed securely enough.

“ What a delightful Dürer engraving we should make ! ” exclaimed Mabel suddenly, “ creeping along between these dark cliffs under such a gorgeous red sky. But it's contrary to all symbolism that you should be riding first.”

“ The colour of the sky would scarcely tell in an engraving,” answered Brendon, with a perceptible accent of reproof. “ But the idea would work out well in black and white.”

“ Oh dear, no ! ” persisted Mabel. “ The sky is

everything. It gives such a threatening touch. I feel quite weird myself, don't——"

"Don't you?" she was going to say, but the words were cut short, for a shot was fired among the rocks on the left, close beside her. Roy, accustomed to such sounds, merely started slightly and pricked up his ears, but the pony shied violently, and received a cut from its rider.

"Abominable carelessness!" shouted Brendon to Mabel, looking round as the animal dashed forward. "I'm coming back to hunt that fellow out. He might have shot one of us."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before the pony reared suddenly and then fell forward, throwing him over its head. At the same moment Mabel heard the sound of another horse's feet behind her, and before she could look round some one dealt Roy a smart blow on the flank. She felt him rise for a leap, and was conscious that his heels touched something as he went over. It seemed a miracle that he did not land upon his head, but as it was, the shock, when his hoofs clattered down amongst the stones, nearly unseated Mabel, and before she could collect her scattered senses three mounted men appeared, as if by magic, from among the rocks on either hand. Before she had time to do more than realise that they wore turbans, a fourth man pushed up from behind, and seizing her bridle, forced Roy into a canter. She had a momentary vision of Brendon, his face streaming with blood, flinging himself between her horse and her captor's, and trying to wrest the bridle from him; she saw the sweep of steel in the red light as one of the other

men turned round; saw Brendon cut down by a murderous blow from a tulwar. It was all over in a moment, and before she could even scream, she and her captors were out of the gorge and riding swiftly to the right, away from Alibad and safety. From the fatal spot they had left there came faintly to her ears the sound of several shots.

The sound reached other ears as well as Mabel's. Mr Burgrave and Fitz, riding leisurely, as they had been when Mabel and her cavalier left them behind in their race, started when they heard it, and put spurs to their horses. Entering the gorge they could see nothing but dark rocks and lurid sky. No! what was that?—a bright flash, followed by another report, coming from a spot close to the ground at the further end. Riding headlong down the ravine, regardless of the shifting boulders, they distinguished at last the form of Brendon, his light clothes dyed with blood. He was dragging himself painfully towards them, holding his discharged revolver in his left hand.

“They've got Miss North!” he gasped, as they neared him.

With a sharp exclamation Mr Burgrave dug his spurs deeper and dashed on, but Fitz, catching the look of agony on Brendon's face, drew rein for a moment.

“She's riding—a troop-horse. Yell to him—to ‘Halt!’” came in broken sentences. “And look out. There's a—rope.”

Even as he sank down exhausted from loss of blood, there was a crash in front. The Commissioner and his horse had gone down in a heap, marking only too accurately the position of the

rope. Fitz galloped forward, his pony taking the obstacle like a bird.

“ Ride on, for Heaven’s sake ! Never mind me ! ” came in a despairing shout from the man who lay helpless under the struggling horse, and Fitz obeyed. He was out of the gorge now, and could see far away to the right the dark moving mass which represented the object of his pursuit. Ramming in his spurs, he followed at breakneck speed, his whole soul absorbed in the savage determination to catch up the robbers and their prey. Whether he and Sheikh lived or died, they must reach that goal. Thundering on, his eyes fixed upon his quarry, he perceived presently, with a fierce joy, that it was becoming clearer to his view. He was gaining ! Now he could distinguish the forms of the men and their horses, and presently he was able to assure himself that the wiry little native steeds were undoubtedly handicapped by the necessity of accommodating their pace to that of the heavier Roy. That the robbers he was pursuing were four to one did not occur to Fitz, even in face of the ominous fact that they made no attempt to interfere with him, too confident in their superior numbers to take the trouble to separate and cut him off. The moment that he felt sure of his advantage, his plan was ready, formed complete in his mind, and without any volition of his own, his revolver was in his hand, cocked, the moment after. As he diminished the distance between himself and the robbers, he saw that they were no longer in a compact body. The three unencumbered riders were leading, and Mabel and the man who held her bridle came after. Mabel had

recovered her presence of mind by this time. She was striking furiously with her whip at the hand which gripped her rein, in the hope of forcing the robber to loose his hold, but in vain. He could not spare a hand to snatch away the whip, but his grasp upon the bridle never relaxed. Suddenly a voice sounded in her ears. Standing in his stirrups, Fitz put all the power of his lungs into the one word, "Halt!" and at the well-known shout Roy stopped dead, his feet firmly planted together. The shock dragged the robber from his saddle, and his own horse, terrified, continued its headlong career. Still grasping Mabel's bridle with his left hand, he drew his tulwar and sprang at Fitz. A bullet from the ready revolver met him as he came, and he fell forward, the tulwar dropping harmless from his fingers, which gripped for a moment convulsively at the sand under Sheikh's hoofs.

"Quick! Get behind me! Crouch between the horses!" cried Fitz to Mabel, urging the panting Sheikh in front of Roy. The three men in front had faced round, and seemed to be meditating a charge, but they were without firearms, and Fitz, standing behind his pony, had them covered if they should approach. Left to themselves, they might have distracted his attention by coming at him from different directions, and taken him in the rear, but the other members of the party had now emerged from the gorge, and were riding down on them with shouts. Prudent counsels prevailed, and they turned their horses' heads again, and rode off into the gathering darkness, leaving the victorious Fitz with two trembling, sweating horses, and Mabel, crouched

on the sand, clutching wildly at his feet. She tried to speak as she looked up at him, but no words would come, and only a hoarse scream issued from her lips. The sight of her utter prostration almost unmanned him.

“Don’t, don’t, Miss North!” he entreated, trying to lift her up. “You’re safe now, and the others will be here in a minute. Don’t let them see you like this.”

She swayed to and fro as he raised her, and staggering to Roy’s side buried her face in his mane. Fitz turned away. It would be taking an unfair advantage, he felt, to speak to her in this forlorn state, and he began to pat Sheikh, and praise his gallant efforts in a low tone. Many a time afterwards did he curse himself as a fool for this backwardness of his, but at the moment it was impossible to him to take her in his arms and comfort her, as his heart urged him to do. She had been saved from death or worse by his means, and he could not presume upon the service he had rendered her.

The moment’s constraint was quickly ended by the eager questions of the men who came galloping up. Fitz stepped forward to meet them.

“Look out!” he said hastily, jerking his head in Mabel’s direction, “Miss North is awfully knocked up. Leave her to herself for a moment. Is Tighe here?”

“He stopped at the nullah. It’s a bad job there. Brendon’s gone, poor old chap! and the Commissioner’s pretty extensively damaged. Jolly good job the doctor was able to ride out this afternoon.”

“I say, look here,” said Fitz, “we mustn’t let

her know about this. Can't we get her straight home?"

"Must go back to the nullah. The Colonel and one or two more whose horses were no good stayed with Tighe to help him dig out the Commissioner. He had managed to shoot his horse, lest it should kick his brains out, but it was lying right across him. They'll want help in getting him home, and poor Brendon too."

"Well, say nothing to Miss North, and we'll try to keep it dark. There, she's coming. Can't you say something ordinary?"

Milton, to whom the request—or rather command—was addressed, gasped helplessly. The circumstances seemed to preclude him from saying anything at all, but as Mabel came towards them, her face still white and her lips trembling, a happy thought seized two of the other men simultaneously.

"We've never even looked at the rascal you potted!" they cried to Fitz. "Here, come along. Who's got a match?"

Mabel shuddered, and caught at Fitz's arm, but a dreadful fascination seemed to draw her to the place where the dead robber lay. Some one produced a box of matches, and kneeling down, struck a light close to the face of the corpse. Fitz knew as well as Mabel what face she expected to see, and he could hardly keep himself from echoing her cry of surprise and relief when they realised that a stranger lay before them.

"Wait a minute, though," said one of the officers, pressing forward. "Lend us another match, old man. Yes, I thought so! It's Mumtaz Mohammed,

the sowar who deserted five or six weeks back. See, he has his carbine on his back."

"Then it was only a common or garden raid, and not a planned thing," said another. "I know it was said he had got away to those fellows who broke out of prison at Kharrakpur."

"No," said Mabel suddenly; "it was a plot."

"Why, Miss North—how do you know?" they asked, astonished.

"Because my syce was in it. He told me this morning my pony could not be ridden, and wanted me to send for Laili, whom Mr Anstruther is training for me. She bolts at the sound of a shot. It was a shot fired in the nullah that began this—this——"

"And you didn't ride Laili after all?"

"No, I would ride Roy. I asked for him just to see what Dick would say, and when he didn't want me to have him, I persisted, simply to tease him. And it has saved my life!" she cried hysterically.

"Not much doubt who stood to benefit by the plot!" muttered one of the men who had stood behind Mabel at the Gymkhana, but Fitz nudged the speaker fiercely.

"I don't know what we're all standing here for—in case our deceased friend's sorrowing relations like to come back and wipe us out, I suppose. Let me mount you, Miss North. Are you fellows going to stop out all night? Had we better bring *that* along, do you think?"

This was added in a lower tone, as he pointed to the robber's corpse. After some demur it was decided to lay it across the saddle of Brendon's

pony, which had found its way again to the rest with a pair of broken knees, and they rode back towards the gorge, the last man leading the laden pony, so that it might be kept out of Mabel's sight. As they approached the entrance to the ravine Dr Tighe came forward hastily to meet them.

"Look here," he said, "I want some one to ride on to Alibad at once. The Commissioner has broken his knee-cap and a few other things, and Major North's is the nearest house, but Mrs North mustn't be frightened. Milton, your pony's a good one, I know, so just take it out of him. Say nothing about Miss North or Brendon or anything, but tell Mrs North the Commissioner has had a nasty fall, and I am bringing him to her house with a fractured patella and a pair of smashed ribs. She can get things ready, and send on to my house for anything she doesn't happen to have."

"Surely the ladies had better go back with me, Doctor?" asked Milton, pausing as he was about to start.

"No, we don't want any more kidnapping to-night. We must travel slowly, all of us, but they'll be safer than with you. Feel shaky, Miss North? Drink this," and he handed her a flask-cup. "Miss Graham is waiting to weep tears of joy over you. What, aren't you gone yet, Milton?"

"Tell Major North to arrest the syce," Fitz shouted after the messenger as he disappeared in the darkness.

"Off with your coats, you young fellows!" cried Dr Tighe, as the thud of the pony's steps upon the sand died away. "The Commissioner has to be

carried home somehow, and there's not so much as a stick to make a stretcher of. We must tie the coats together by the sleeves, and manufacture a litter in that way."

No one dared to scoff, although no one could understand what the doctor meant to do; but working energetically under his directions, they succeeded in framing a sufficiently practicable litter. Six of the party were chosen as bearers, and the others were to relieve them, their duty in the meantime being to lead the riderless horses and keep watch against a surprise. Mabel and Flora, who had been enjoying the luxury of shedding a few tears together in private, were placed at the head of the procession, and the march began. At first the litter containing the wounded man followed close after the two girls; but presently Fitz, who was one of the bearers, felt his arm grasped.

"Let the ladies get ahead of us, please. I—I can't stand this very well."

Fitz understood. Mr Burgrave was suffering acutely in being carried over the rough ground, and he feared lest some sound extorted from him by the pain should acquaint Mabel with the fact. The litter and its bearers dropped behind, and if now and then a groan was forced from the Commissioner's lips, his rival, at any rate, felt no contempt for the involuntary weakness. Before half of the journey had been accomplished, a relief party, headed by Dick, met them, and Mr Burgrave was transferred to a charpoy carried by natives, after Dr Tighe had made rough and ready use of the splints and strapping Georgia had sent. A little later a detachment

of the Khemistan Horse passed at a smart trot in the direction of the gorge. It was not now the rule, as in the early days of General Keeling's reign, for the regiment to sleep in its boots, but it was still supposed to be ready day and night to trace the perpetrators of any outrage and bring them to justice—rough justice, sometimes, but none the less impressive for that. The sight gave Mabel a sense of safety and comfort, and she scouted Flora's proposal that she should come home with her for the night.

"As if I would leave Georgie alone, with all this extra work on her hands!" she said, as they turned in at the gate.

"Oh, Mab, is it true about the Commissioner?" cried Georgia, coming out to meet them on the verandah.

"Yes; I am afraid he's dreadfully hurt, poor man!"

"Was he riding with you when he fell?"

"He—he was riding after me," said Mabel cautiously.

Georgia threw up her hands. "Oh, if you could only have hurt any other man, or taken him to any house but this!" she cried; and Mabel thought it both unkind and unfair, considering the circumstances.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION.

HARK! what was that? Mabel sprang up in bed, her heart beating furiously, her hands clammy with fear. There was the sound of horses' feet, the rattling of bridles, on every side. A wild impulse seized her to creep under the dressing-table—to hide herself anywhere, but a moment later she laughed aloud. The very last thing before going to bed, Dick had told her for her comfort that not only would the usual Sikh sentry keep guard over the Commissioner's slumbers, but the compound would be patrolled all night by the Khemistan Horse. She crept to the window and peered out between the slats of the venetians. Yes; there they were—splendid men with huge turbans, and accoutrements glittering in the moonlight—pacing slowly to and fro upon their stout little horses. But how was it that there were two of them at that far corner of the compound, where she could scarcely distinguish their figures, and why had they paused as though to listen for something? Mabel listened too, and presently, above the nearer noises of trampling hoofs and jingling bits, she heard the approach of a galloping horse. Was it a scout coming in to give warning of a

threatened attack? But no; the two men at the corner sat motionless on their horses, and as the sound came nearer and nearer she saw the flash of their tulwars. They were saluting—whom or what? Mabel strained her eyes to see, but could distinguish nothing. Then she remembered. It was General Keeling to whom they were doing honour, as he rode his periodical rounds, watchful for the safety of his old province. A cold sweat broke out all over her, and in a panic of which she was heartily ashamed even at the moment, she scurried back to bed and gave herself up to more and more violent paroxysms of horror. Of what use were sentinels against such a visitant as this? Suppose it was his will to come closer, to come up to the house, to enter? What could be more likely? She lifted her head for a moment and listened again. Surely that was a horse's tread upon the drive, approaching the door? In reality, the intruder was only one of the patrols, but in the state of ungovernable terror in which Mabel was plunged this did not occur to her, and she buried her head under the bed-clothes and screamed.

The ayah, roused from her heavy slumbers by her mistress's shrieks, came shivering to her side and tried to quiet her, but finding her entreaties of no avail, ran for help. Presently Georgia glided in, looking like a reproachful ghost herself, in a white dressing-gown, and proffered Mabel three tabloids and a glass of water, as sternly as if she had been Queen Eleanor handing Rosamund the poison.

"I'll sit by you till you are asleep," she whispered; "but you mustn't make such a noise.

You'll wake the Commissioner, and he has only just dropped off to sleep, poor man!"

"I know I'm a fearful baby," confessed Mabel, restored to calmness by the eminently practical nature of Georgia's benevolence, "but I was so horribly frightened. Is poor Mr Burgrave very bad?"

"It was a nasty accident," replied Georgia, with professional caution.

"What have you done to him?"

"Strapped up the broken ribs, and applied ice to the leg and slung it up."

"Ugh, cruel creature! ice this cold night? I suppose it's because you hate him so much?"

"Hate him? What nonsense! How could we hate a man who has got hurt in trying to save you? He's so brave about it, too."

"And he didn't mind having you for a doctor?"

"Of course I was only helping Dr Tighe. But even if Mr Burgrave disliked my being there, he wouldn't show it. When Dr Tighe told him he had better stay in this house until the splint is taken off, and not run the risk of jarring the limb, he looked at me, and said, 'If my presence is not too troublesome to my kind surgeon here.'"

"And smiled at you like a father. I know," said Mabel, with sleepy sarcasm. "Georgie," she roused herself suddenly, "I want to know—how is——"

"Now, I will not answer another question to-night," said Georgia resolutely. "I am going to read to you till you fall asleep."

When Mabel awoke in the morning she felt oppressed by an intolerable burden. Body and mind seemed to be alike tired out, and it was an effort even to open her eyes. Georgia and Dr Tighe were in the room looking at her, and the sight of them reminded her that there was some question she wanted to ask, but she could not remember what it was.

“Well, Miss North,” said Dr Tighe, “nerves a bit jumpy this morning, eh? We’ll allow you a day in bed to settle them a little, but after that you must get up and help Mrs North to look after her patient.”

“Oh, I’ll get up to-day,” said Mabel faintly.

“No, no; don’t be in too great a hurry. Your brother will come in to ask you a question or two in a few minutes, and afterwards you shall try what a little more sleep and a little more slumber will do for you. It’s quite evident that nature never meant you for a frontierswoman.”

“Oh, Doctor,” expostulated Georgia, “think what she has gone through since she came here, and only out from home such a short time! Besides, nothing so bad as this has ever happened in our neighbourhood before.”

“At any rate, it’s the sort of thing you want to take to young if you’re to shine in it,” said the doctor. “Life in these parts is not exactly pretty, but it has its exciting moments. Nothing like what it had once, though. A predecessor of mine under General Keeling used to head cavalry charges and take forts in the intervals of his medical duties. I have no pleasant little recreations of that sort for

my leisure hours. Now, Miss North, don't let me see you dare to smile at the thought of my heading a cavalry charge. There was some object in training in those days, but naturally a man puts on weight when there's nothing to do but potter about a hospital."

"You see you're not the only person in the world who hankers after thrilling experiences, Mab," said Georgia, as she left the room with the doctor, and the words recalled to Mabel their conversation of three weeks since. Stretching out her hand, she took a mirror from the toilet-table and glanced at herself in it, only to drop the glass in horror. What a hollow-eyed wreck she looked! Was it possible that one night could work such a change? She had had her wish and tried experiments in reality, and she recoiled from the result.

"On the whole, I think I prefer the pleasing fictions of ordinary English life," she said to herself.

"Good-morning, Mab," said Dick's voice, following a knock at the door. "I'm not going to disturb you long, but I want you to tell Tighe and me what you can remember about last night's business. It's necessary for me to know, or I wouldn't bother you."

With a shudder Mabel let her thoughts return to that homeward ride for a moment, then looked up suddenly. "Oh, now I remember!" she said. "My head is so stupid, I couldn't think of it before. How is Mr Brendon?"

Both men had expected her to ask after the Commissioner, and Brendon's name took them by surprise. "Brendon? Oh, he's—he's as well as

he can be," said Dr Tighe hastily, recovering himself first.

"But how can he possibly be well? His arm must have been nearly cut off. He fell down under the horses' feet. Oh, you don't mean—he can't be——?"

The silence was a sufficient answer, and she turned her face to the wall with a moan. Brendon dead—for whom her kindest feeling the evening before had been a more or less good-natured contempt—and he had practically given his life for her!

"Look here, Mab," said Dick earnestly; "it won't do the poor fellow any good to cry about him just now. What we want is evidence to convict the villains who did it."

"Have you caught them?" came in a muffled voice from the bed.

"I hope so. Winlock, who went out to track them last night, had his own ideas on the subject, and posted part of his detachment in hiding among the rocks round Dera Gul. A little before dawn three men rode up, coming from Nalapur way—not from our direction—but they and their horses were all dead-beat. Winlock arrested them, feeling pretty certain they were the men he wanted, and had made a long round to avert suspicion before going home. They were Bahram Khan's servants, sure enough, but he said they had been to Nalapur for him, and he offered no objection to their being arrested. When you are better we must see if you can identify any of them, but now all I want is to know roughly what happened, on account of the—inquiry, which must take place to-day."

Thus stimulated, Mabel told her tale, helped out by questions from Dick, but breaking down more than once. He took down what she said, and the doctor signed it as a witness, and then they left her to Georgia's ministrations. Georgia found her patient excited and tearful, and sent Rahah at once to the surgery to make up a composing draught.

"Now, Mab, lie down and try to be quiet," she said.

"No, I won't lie down. I can't sleep," cried Mabel. "Isn't it dreadful, my having to identify those men? I can't bear to think of it. And it brings it all back so vividly—the horrible helplessness—I could do nothing—*nothing*—to save myself. I think I should have gone mad in another moment if Mr Anstruther had not come up. And now to have to go and look at them in cold blood, and say that I recognise them! Isn't there any way out of it? Oh, Georgie, can't Dick make my syce turn Queen's evidence?"

"I'm afraid not," said Georgia reluctantly. "The fact is, Mab, your syce didn't wait to be caught. He went off while we were at the picnic."

"Oh, well," said Mabel despairingly, "then I must do it, I suppose. It seems a kind of duty, as poor Mr Brendon was killed in trying to save me, to have the men who killed him punished. But it's awful to think that three men will be hanged just because I saw their faces! They will be hanged, won't they?"

"I don't know, really. It is very dreadful, Mab, but there is one good thing about the whole affair. It may put things right on the frontier. Both Dick

and I think Bahram Khan was so confident of Mr Burgrave's support that he ventured on this outrage feeling sure that he would see him through. If these three men are proved to be his agents, it must open the Commissioner's eyes. He's an Englishman and an honourable man, though dreadfully mistaken, and he can't go on backing him up after that. In fact, I'm sure he wouldn't want to."

"No, I don't think he would. And I suppose there is no question about it really? What do other people think?"

"None of the men here have a doubt that it was Bahram Khan's doing. As for the regiment, they are so indignant over the insult offered to Dick in attempting to carry off his sister, that they would like to raze Dera Gul to the ground forthwith."

"Oh, that's the light in which they look at it? They don't think of my feelings in the matter at all?"

"I'm afraid not. You and I are merely Dick's chattels in their eyes, you see."

"I may be, but you are not. My ayah Tara tells me all sorts of wonderful things about you, Georgie, which she picks up from the other servants. Do you know that when you kiss Dick before he starts in the morning, they think you are putting a spell upon him to keep him safe all day, and bring him back to you all right at night?"

Georgia blushed like a girl. "That is really rather sweet," she said. "Rahah despises the people round here too much to tell me anything they say about us."

"Oh, Georgie," cried Mabel, with sudden envy,

“ I would give anything to care for any one as you do for Dick ! You look quite different when you talk about him. If only I wasn't such a cold-hearted wretch ! I wish I had cared for poor Mr Brendon, even ; that would be better than caring for no one but myself.”

She broke into a storm of tearless sobs, and Georgia hailed the appearance of Rahah with the sleeping-draught, which she was obliged to administer almost by force. It was some time in taking effect, but at last the sobs died away, and she was able to leave the patient in charge of her own ayah, while she went about her other duties. Not until the morning of the next day did Mabel wake again, very much ashamed of her behaviour, which she was conscious had not been exactly in accordance with the high aspirations she had formerly confided to Georgia. Resolved to redeem her character, she sprang out of bed at once, and when Georgia came into her room on tiptoe, expecting to find her asleep, she was already dressed.

“ Let me do something to help you,” she said eagerly. “ You must have had a fearful amount of extra work thrown on you yesterday. What can I do ? ”

“ Well, if you are so benevolently inclined, you might sit with the Commissioner a little,” said Georgia. “ He was asking for you all day, and rather suspected us of concealing something dreadful from him.”

“ Very well,” said Mabel readily. The proposal exactly fell in with her wishes, for she had conceived a magnificent idea while dressing. By her

diplomacy she would induce the Commissioner to reverse his frontier policy.

"Miss North!" Mr Burgrave started up from his pillows as Mabel entered the sickroom, but becoming suddenly conscious of his injuries, he sank back again stiffly. "Excuse my left hand," he added. "The other is off work just now. And how are you? Really not much the worse?"

"I had no business to be any the worse," returned Mabel. "Nothing happened to me, thanks to you and—the others."

"Ah, but the shock to the nerves must have been exceedingly severe," said Mr Burgrave soothingly. "As I remarked to Tighe yesterday, Mrs North would have got over anything of the kind in an hour or two, but you are much more highly strung."

Mabel was vaguely aware that the comparison was intended to be in her own favour, but she could not agree that the advantage was on her side, and she changed the subject hastily. "I don't know how to thank you for what you did. Every time I think of that evening I feel more and more how grateful I ought to be. And I am, indeed, but I can't say what I should like."

Mr Burgrave raised his hand. "Please don't, Miss North, or you will make me more miserable than I am already. How can I forget that I did nothing to help you? Mr Anstruther had that happiness, while I was lying on the ground under my horse."

"But you tried—you did all you could—you are so terribly hurt!" protested Mabel.

"Yes, and that is my only comfort. I was hurt,

and therefore I am here. No, on second thoughts, I don't even envy Anstruther. He did the work, but I have basely annexed the reward. To have rescued you was happiness enough for him. I, who was unsuccessful, am consoled by finding myself under the same roof with you for a fortnight. That is enough for me."

"How nice of you to say so!" Mabel rose. "Then I can leave you alone quite happily, and go and help Georgia?"

"Miss North, you are not going already? What have I said to drive you out of the room? Do you want me to pine away in melancholy solitude? After all, I did try to rescue you, as you were kind enough to say just now; but it will need your constant society and conversation to keep me from brooding over my failure."

"I'm afraid my society won't be very cheerful," said Mabel, resuming her seat with a sigh. "You see, I can't help feeling that what happened was a good deal my fault. If I had only told what I knew——"

"Well?" asked Mr Burchgrave anxiously, as she paused.

"Ah, but if I had, you would not have believed it," was the unexpected response, "any more than you would now."

"Do you think I should be so rude as to question your word?"

"You will when I tell you that I know the men who tried to carry me off were agents of Bahram Khan's."

"You have evidence to support this very serious

charge, I presume? Are you able to identify the men?"

"I suppose so; I haven't tried yet. But, Mr Burgrave, I'm going to tell you something that only my sister-in-law knows—not even my brother, for I wouldn't let her say anything to him. Bahram Khan did want to—to marry me."

"What?" cried the Commissioner, starting up again. "You don't mean to say that he has ever ventured to—to suggest such a thing to you?" Rage and disgust strove for the mastery in his voice.

"Oh no, he has never said anything to me; but the day I was at Dera Gul the women talked of nothing else."

"Oh, the women!" Mr Burgrave spoke quite calmly again, and with evident relief. "You must remember that Bahram Khan is a good deal more advanced in his notions than the other Sardars of the province, and would like to imitate our ways with regard to ladies—English ladies, I mean. That is just the sort of thing that native women can't understand. Any polite attention he might offer you would be misconstrued by them into a cause for violent jealousy. Their mistake made things extremely unpleasant for you at the moment, no doubt; but you need not torment yourself with thinking that he had any such preposterous idea in his head."

Mr Burgrave did not actually say that a lady accustomed to universal admiration was liable to perceive it even where it did not exist, but this was what Mabel understood his slightly repressive tone to imply. Ignorant of the Eye-of-the-Begum's

secret mission to Georgia, she could not defend herself against the suggestion, and she grew crimson.

“Why don't you say that I imagined the whole thing?” she demanded. “It's not an experience I am proud of, I assure you. I told it you purely in the hope that it might open your eyes a little, but since you prefer to regard Bahram Khan as an interesting martyr——”

“Pray don't mistake me, Miss North. If I believed that Bahram Khan had really devised this dastardly plot against you, I would hunt him down like a bloodhound until he was delivered up to justice, though that would mean the death of all my hopes for this frontier. In one way, of course, it would simplify matters a good deal. I am not in the habit of bothering ladies with politics, but there can be no harm in saying that it gives me great pain to differ from a man I respect as I do your brother. He has done so much for the frontier that it seems almost presumption in me, a newcomer, to set my opinion above his. However, I have formed that opinion after long and careful study of the Khemistan problem, and only the very strongest proof that I had been mistaken could induce me to alter it. But if you should be able to identify Bahram Khan's servants as your assailants, it would be conclusive evidence that he is not the man I take him to be.”

“And then you would see that Dick was right, and leave him to manage things in his own way?”

“My dear Miss North, we are now soaring into the domain of improbabilities. If my opinion were

once modified, it is possible that your brother's view might prevail, or again, it might not."

"I am certain he would not be sorry if Bahram Khan was proved to be untrustworthy," was Mabel's mental comment. "It would show him a way out of his difficulty. And now I shall be able to do it."

Mabel was particularly cheerful all the rest of the day, as indeed she had a right to be, for was she not about to secure the safety of the frontier? Warned by her experience of the morning, she made no further attempt to entrap Mr Burgrave into a political discussion, but contented herself with showing in numberless little ways her gratitude for the concession he was prepared to make. She even welcomed his offer to introduce her to the beauties of Robert Browning, a poet whose works she had been wont to regard with the mingled alarm and dislike which, in the case of a modern young lady, can only spring from ignorance of them. He sent a servant back to the bungalow he had occupied to fetch the two portly volumes which, as he told her, always formed a part of his travelling library, and she read aloud to him without a murmur a considerable portion of "Paracelsus." Under the combined influence of his favourite poet and the reader's voice, the Commissioner forgot alike his injuries and the difficulties which beset his policy, and the household fairly basked in his smiles. This, at least, was what Fitz Anstruther said, but he had happened to intrude upon the reading as the bearer of an important message from Dick, and was adversely affected by the peaceful scene.

The next morning, as Dick was going to his office,

Mabel intercepted him in the verandah. "I am ready to identify those men as soon as you like, Dick," she said.

He looked at her in surprise. "Wouldn't you rather wait until you have recovered a little from the shock?" he asked.

"Oh no, I'm all right now. I should like to get it over, Dick."

"Well, you certainly seem to have picked up wonderfully. I suppose there's no doubt of your knowing them again?"

Mabel shuddered. "How could I help recognising them? The red light, and these awful faces—it seems as if the whole thing was photographed on my mind. I should know them anywhere."

"Oh, all right. It would be far worse, you know, to try to identify them and fail than to let the thing go altogether."

"You needn't be afraid. Only I should be glad not to have to look forward to it much longer."

"Very well. No doubt it's better to do it before the impression has a chance of fading from your mind. It's a bother about the Commissioner, though. He insists on being present, and Georgie and Tighe say he mustn't on any account be allowed to move until they have wired his knee. We shall have to carry his bed out on the verandah, I suppose. Just like him to think the show can't go on without him. Of course he's afraid we shall contrive to bring his precious *protégé* in guilty in some under-hand way."

Mabel smiled as Dick went down the steps, for she knew better. Mr Burggrave's anxiety was not

so much for Bahram Khan personally as for his own schemes, and not so much for them as for the continuance of his friendship with the North family. This knowledge, and the pleasing conviction that she alone possessed it, sustained her when she was summoned in the afternoon to identify her three surviving assailants.

"Come along," said Dick, entering the drawing-room; "they're all here, and Tighe has superintended the removal of the distinguished patient. They're in the verandah outside his room. Don't be frightened, Mab. Georgia shall come too, and support you."

In spite of her resolution, Mabel trembled a little as she entered the improvised police-court, realising once more what issues hung upon her words. Fitz was there, and a Hindu clerk, and the Commissioner, propped up in bed. Before them stood a dozen natives with turbans and clothes of various degrees of picturesque dirt and raggedness, guarded by as many dismounted troopers armed to the teeth.

"Now, Mab, pick 'em out," murmured Dick, from behind his sister.

"But there are too many men here. There were only three left," objected Mabel, in a hasty whisper.

"Well, and you have to tell us which they were. You didn't think we were going to parade the three prisoners and invite you to swear to them, did you? Now don't waste the time of the court."

Absolute despair seized upon Mabel as she stood in front of the line of men, and looked shrinkingly into their faces. How was it possible that so many

natives, differing presumably in origin and circumstances, could be so much alike? Not one of them blenched under her timid scrutiny. Some looked stolid and some bored, and one or two even amused, but this gave her no help. At last, however, it struck her that there was something familiar in one or two of the faces. She moved a step or so in order to examine them more carefully, and then looked round at Dick and the rest.

"This man," she said, pointing to one, "and that one, and this."

"You are certain?" asked Mr Burggrave.

"Yes; I know their faces quite well."

This time an undisguised smile ran momentarily along the line of swarthy countenances, only to disappear before Dick's frown.

"Take them away," he said to the troopers, and with a clanking of chains here and there the prisoners and their guard departed.

"What is the matter?" asked Mabel in bewilderment, as she looked from one to the other of the three chagrined faces before her. "What have I done?"

"Oh, only identified as your assailants one of the *chaprasis* and a sowar in mufti and the gardener's son, who were all peacefully going about their lawful business at the time of the outrage," said Dick bitterly. "You have made us the laughing-stock of the frontier."

"But—but weren't the real men there at all?"

"Of course they were, but you passed them over."

"And what will happen to them now?"

“ They’ll be discharged for lack of evidence, that’s all. Bahram Khan will testify that they had been to Nalapur on an errand for him, and other witnesses will swear that they saw and spoke to them there, and we can say nothing.”

CHAPTER IX.

WOUNDED HERO AND MINISTERING ANGEL.

“ ‘ ARE we not halves of one dissevered world,
Whom this strange chance unites once more ? Part ? never !
Till thou, the lover, know ; and I, the knower,
Love—’ ”

read Mabel, and paused, since it was evident that her auditor had some remark to make.

“ It has always seemed to me,” said Mr Burgrave, “ that in this meeting between Paracelsus and Aprile, whose characteristics are so essentially feminine, the poet has typified for all time the union of the masculine and feminine elements in human nature. Woman—the creature of feeling, man—the creature of reason, neither complete without the other. Before perfection can be attained, the lover must learn to know, the knower to love.”

“ All women are not creatures of feeling,” said Mabel.

“ But you would scarcely say that any woman was a creature of reason ? Such a—a person would not be a woman. She would be a monstrosity.”

“ I mean that I don't think you can divide people by hard and fast lines in that way. It's perfectly

possible for a man to be a creature of feeling, and I know women who are quite as reasonable as any man."

"Pardon me; you don't altogether follow my argument. I yield to no one in my admiration of the conclusions at which women arrive. They are often—one might say very often—astonishingly correct, but they are purely the result of a leap in the dark, and not of any process of reasoning. And since this is so, no wise man can feel safe in acting upon them, while where the lady—as is not infrequently the case with her charming sex—is biassed by her personal feelings, they are liable to be dangerously deceptive."

Mabel closed the book with a bang. "I wonder," she said angrily, "at your talking in this way, as if I wasn't horribly humiliated enough already. It was simply a chance that I didn't identify the right men, and I *know* just the same that it was Bahram Khan who employed them."

Mr Burgrave raised his eyebrows slightly. "Indeed, my dear Miss North, you must pardon my maladroitness. I assure you that I had no intention whatever of alluding to the—let us say the disagreeable incident of yesterday. I was dealing purely with generalities."

"But you yourself know perfectly well—though you pretend not to think so—that it was Bahram Khan," persisted Mabel.

The Commissioner raised himself on his elbow and looked straight at her, and Mabel quailed. "And is it possible," he demanded, "that you believe I am deliberately sheltering from justice, contrary to

the dictates of my own conscience, a wretch who has dared to raise his hand against an Englishwoman—against a lady for whom I have the highest regard? No, Miss North, you must be good enough to withdraw those words. Even your brother and his wife are sufficiently just to believe me an honourable man, although we differ on so many points.”

The stern blue eyes under the lowering brows seemed to pierce Mabel through and through. She half rose from her chair, then sat down again, and repressed with difficulty a threatened burst of tears.

“I—I didn’t mean that,” she faltered. “All I meant was that I didn’t see how you could think anything else when we are all so sure of it.”

“Allow me to say that I credit you with the sincerity you refuse to recognise in me. Your brother has a strong prejudice—there is no other word for it—against Bahram Khan, which he has transmitted to you, and you look at the facts in the light of that prejudice. I was perfectly willing to be convinced of the young man’s guilt by the merest shred of anything that could be called evidence, but none was produced. The case against him broke down completely. Would you have me withdraw my countenance from a man whom I conscientiously believe to be innocent, and ruin all his prospects, simply on the score of an unf— unsupported opinion of yours? No, Miss North, I won’t believe it of you. You must perceive that I am right.”

“But you said our intuitions were wonderfully correct, and that your judgment was incomplete by itself,” urged Mabel.

“To be of any real value, the feminine intuition

must be confirmed by the masculine judgment. Its use is purely supplementary."

"Oh, Mr Burgrave, you can't really mean that! Why, my brother would never dream of doing anything without consulting his wife. He thinks most highly of her judgment."

"Surely Major North is the best judge of his own affairs?" suggested Mr Burgrave drily. "If he has confidence in his wife's judgment, it is only natural he should wish to avail himself of it. Such would not be my case, I confess, but then, the confidence would be wanting."

"But, according to you, I ought to model my opinions on some one's," said Mabel—"Dick's, I suppose—and that's just what you have been scolding me for doing."

"Dick's?" said the Commissioner reflectively. "No, not Dick's, I think. That was not at all what I had in my mind, Miss North. And have I been scolding you, or is that another mistaken intuition? You know how gladly I would have accepted your view of Bahram Khan's guilt, if that had been possible?"

"I know you said so, and I hoped so much——" Mabel's eyes were full of tears.

"And do you know why that was?"

"No, indeed, I can't imagine." She spoke hastily, scenting danger. The Commissioner smiled paternally.

"No? Then will you do me the favour to consider the matter? Ask yourself why I was willing, even anxious, to be converted from my own opinion. When you have arrived at the answer, I shall know."

He smiled at her again from his pillows, but Mabel muttered something incoherent and fled.

“I don’t know what to do!” she cried, in the seclusion of her own room. “Does he think I am a baby, or a little schoolgirl? If he wants to propose, why can’t he do it straight out, and take his refusal like a man? I know how to manage that sort of thing. But to break the idea to me gradually in this way, as if I was—oh, I don’t know what—a sort of fairy that must be handled gently for fear it should vanish into thin air—it’s insufferable! And the worst of it is, I can’t quite make out how to stop it. I seem somehow to have got myself into his power.”

To see as little of Mr Burgrave as possible, and to confine the conversation to safe subjects when she did meet him, was the remedy which naturally suggested itself, and Mabel did her best to apply it; but, to her dismay, it did not appear to produce any effect. She had even a distinct feeling that it was just what Mr Burgrave had expected. Moreover, it was extremely difficult to put in practice. Now that the operation had been performed on the patient’s knee, and the leg fixed immovably in a splint, he was allowed to be lifted on a couch, and thus to spend his days in the society of his hosts. Dick was out as much as ever, and when Georgia was busy, it was obviously Mabel’s duty to entertain the invalid. It is sad to relate that when escape proved impossible, she was reduced to assuming an intense interest in the study of Browning, toiling through “Sordello” with astonishing patience. But if any valid excuse offered itself for leaving Mr

Burgrave to his own reflections, she embraced it gladly, and when the arrival in the neighbourhood of one of the nomadic tribes brought Georgia a sudden rush of patients, she volunteered at once to help her in dealing with them.

The surgery in which Georgia received her visitors was a building standing by itself in the compound, and approached by a special gate in the wall, so that the ladies might come to see their doctor without fear of encountering any rude masculine gaze. As an additional precaution, when the wives of any of the chief men came to the surgery, they brought a youth with them as attendant, who mounted guard over a motley array of slippers at the door, and completed the security against profane intrusion. Inside, Georgia dealt with the cases individually in a small room at one end, while in the large room the visitors sat on the floor in rows, looking at the pictures on the walls, or listening casually to the Biblewoman, trained by Miss Jenkins at the Bab-us-Sahel Mission, who sat among them and read or talked. At the other end was another small room, where a patient and her friends were occasionally accommodated when Georgia had any special reason for wishing to keep the case under her own eye, and the husband was more than usually indulgent. At other times there stood in this room a spring bedstead, which was never used, but which the women made up parties to inspect, personally conducted by Rahah. There was a history attaching to this object of pilgrimage. Two years before a lady globe-trotter of exalted rank, in the course of an adventurous flying visit to the frontier, had

spent a night at the Norths', and been stirred to enthusiasm by Georgia's quiet but far-reaching work among the women. Her Grace deplored sympathetically the absence of a proper hospital, and offered to put her London drawing-room at Mrs North's disposal during her next visit home, that she might plead for funds to establish one. Georgia pointed out, however, that the smallness of the station, and the uncertain character of the wanderings of the tribes, would probably result in leaving the hospital empty for eleven months out of the year, while if Dick should be transferred to another post, its *raison d'être* would be gone. The duchess was disappointed, but not crushed. Would Mrs North allow her to send a gift, just one, to the surgery as it stood at present? She could not bear to think of the terrible discomfort the poor sick women must suffer.

Georgia consented, and after a time the gift arrived, brought up-country at a vast expenditure of toil and money. It was a regulation hospital bed, the very latest patent, which could be made to roll itself the wrong way like a bucking horse, stand up on end, kneel down like a camel, dislocate itself in unexpected places, and perform other acrobatic feats, all by turning a handle. Rahah sat before it in silent admiration for a whole morning, occasionally pressing the wires gently down for the pleasure of seeing them rise again. When she had drunk in this delight sufficiently, she ventured to put the bedstead through its paces, rushing to summon her mistress in joyful awe at each new trick she discovered. But so far, her enjoyment was incom-

plete. To be perfect, the bed needed a patient to occupy it, and at last one was brought in by her friends, crippled by some rheumatic affection. Rahah herself laid her on the bed, only to behold her leap from it immediately with the strength of perfect health. There was an evil spirit in the bed, she declared. All other beds sank when you lay down upon them, this one rose up. And in spite of the wonderful cure of this first and only case, the bed was never occupied again. It was talked of all along the frontier, the women came for miles to see it, and watched in shuddering delight while Rahah showed them what it could do ; but it was only very rarely that a heroine could be found bold enough even to touch it with a finger. Meanwhile, the patients continued to sleep on their mats or their charpoys, insisting that the bed should be turned out of the room before they would take up their quarters there, lest the evil spirit should seize upon them during the hours of darkness.

On this particular morning Rahah was exhibiting the wonders of the bed to a party of new arrivals, and Mabel was deputed to see that the patients were admitted into Georgia's sanctum in proper order, and only one at a time. Seeing that they were all comfortably seated facing the Biblewoman, she thought it would be best to begin with those nearest the door, thus going through the whole assemblage methodically. The women, on the other hand, considered that the worst cases ought to be seen first, and each woman was firmly convinced that her own case was the worst of all. Hence arose an uproar, in which the sympathising friends accom-

panying each would-be patient joined with all the force of their lungs, besieging the unfortunate Mabel, who could not understand a word, with a tumult of assertions, contradictions, and maledictions. At last one woman, who carried a baby, was seized with a bright idea. Flinging away a fold of her veil from the child's face, she held it out to Mabel, exhibiting the awful condition of its eyes, which were almost sightless from neglected ophthalmia, as an incontestable proof of her right to the first place. The hint was not lost upon the other women, and in a moment Mabel was surrounded by sights from which she recoiled in horror. At first she was too much appalled to move, as each woman displayed triumphantly the urgency of her own need, and then she turned sick and faint. The agglomeration of so many miseries was too much for her. Rahah, returning at the moment, left the outer door open, and this gave her courage to escape. Pressing her hands over her eyes, she burst through the astonished crowd, drank in a draught of pure fresh air, and then fairly ran across the compound and back to the house. Mounting the steps with difficulty, she staggered and caught at the rail to steady herself, only avoiding a fall by a wild clutch at one of the pillars when she reached the top. An exclamation of concern reached her ears, and she became dimly conscious that Mr Burgrave was making desperate efforts to rise from his couch.

“ You are ill, Miss North! What is it? You don't mean to say that another attempt has been made—— ? ”

“ To carry me off? Oh no, not quite so near

home." Mabel laughed a little, and as she began to see more clearly, noticed how the remorseful anxiety in his face gave place to unfeigned relief. "No, I'm not ill, only silly and faint."

"Try a whiff of this, then." He passed her a bottle of salts. "I was allowed to revive myself with it when my doctors had been investigating the inside of my knee a little more closely than was pleasant."

"Oh, don't!" cried Mabel faintly. "I never want to hear a doctor mentioned again."

"Why, what has happened? Has Mrs North turned vivisectionist?"

"No, of course not. It was only that I was helping her with her patients, and they had such awful things the matter with them that I—well, I ran away."

"And very wisely. Do I understand that Mrs North required you to expose yourself to the sight of these horrors? It is monstrous!"

"She didn't ask me to come; I offered to help her."

"In the hope of pleasing her, of course. It is all the same. In the abundant strength of mind and body she possesses, she forgets that other people are more delicately organised than herself. I am amazed at her lack of consideration."

"I won't have you say such things about Georgia!" cried Mabel. "She is the best and dearest woman I know."

"I honour your enthusiasm. Pray don't mistake me. I have the highest possible esteem myself for Mrs North, but she is a little too strenuous for my taste."

“ I wouldn't have her the least bit different. I wish I was like her, instead of being so silly and cowardly.”

“ No, Miss North, let me beg of you not to wish that. I would not have *you* different. Your sister-in-law's training and her past experiences account for many—er—remarkable points in her character, but, believe me, your true friends would rather see in you this womanly shrinking from the sight of suffering than a bold determination to relieve it.”

“ I hope I may consider you one of those true friends ? ” Mabel tried to infuse a note of strong sarcasm into her voice.

“ I hope you may. It is difficult, is it not, to feel confidence in one who differs so totally from Mrs North and her husband ? But this is a question upon which we will not enter—yet.”

“ Could I say that I preferred to enter upon it at once ? ” Mabel demanded angrily of herself when she had made her escape. “ Somehow he gets such an advantage over me by putting me down in that lofty way, and yet I don't know how to stop it. The idea of his daring to criticise Georgie to me ! ”

But Mr Burgrave was even bolder than Mabel imagined. Returning the next morning from a ride with Fitz Anstruther, she was greeted by a laugh from Georgia as she mounted the steps.

“ Oh, Mab, I have been having quite a scolding, and all about you ! It's clear I am not worthy to have such a sister-in-law.”

“ Georgie ! you don't mean that Mr Burgrave has been so rude as to——”

“ Now, Mab, you know better than that. It

would be impossible to him to be rude. He simply took me to task, very mildly and calmly, about the way I neglect you, though I stand to you in the place of a mother——”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Mabel, her face scarlet.

“So he says. It seems I am lacking in the tenderness which should be lavished upon you. Our rough frontier life ought to be tempered to you by all sorts of sweetness and light which I have made no attempt to supply. I have been inconsiderate in bringing you into contact with the revolting details of my professional work, and a lot more. Do forgive me, Mab. I really haven’t meant to do all these dreadful things, but you did want to make acquaintance with realities, you know.”

“That man is getting unbearable!” broke from Mabel. “I shall speak to him—No, I shan’t,” she added wearily; “it’s no good. He gets the better of me somehow or other. Can’t you put a little cold poison into his medicine, Georgie? Surely it’s a case in which the end would justify the means.”

She went indoors with rather a forced laugh, and Fitz, who had been looking out over the desert without appearing to notice what was being said, turned round suddenly to Georgia.

“Can you honestly expect me to stand all this much longer, Mrs North?”

“All what?” asked Georgia, in astonishment.

“The Commissioner’s intolerable assumption. Any one would think he was Miss North’s guardian, or her father, or even”—with a fierce laugh—“her husband. What right has he to take it upon himself to defend her?—as if she needed any defending

against you! It's nothing but his arrogant impudence."

"But still"—Georgia spoke with some hesitation—"how does it affect you?"

"Oh, Mrs North, you needn't pretend not to have noticed. You know as well as I do that the Commissioner and I are both—er—well, we are both awfully gone on Miss North, and he isn't playing fair. You have seen it, haven't you?"

"I have, indeed, but I hoped you hadn't quite found out what your real feelings were."

"Surely you must have thought me a hopeless idiot? I found out all about it the day she had that fall from her horse."

"So long ago as that! Why, you had scarcely known her a fortnight!"

"But I met her first years ago, before we went to Kubbet-ul-Haj. Besides, what does it signify if I had only known her an hour? It is the kind of feeling one can only have for one woman in one's life."

"But you didn't say anything?" asked Georgia anxiously.

Fitz laughed shamefacedly. "No, I have said nothing even yet. The fact is, it seemed sacrilege even to think of it. She is so lovely, so sweet, so far above me in every way! Oh, Mrs North, I could rave about her for hours."

"And so you shall," was the cordial but unexpected response, "as often as you like, and I will listen patiently, provided that you still say nothing to her."

"No, no; things can't go on in this way. You

see, the Commissioner has changed all that. He goes in and fights for his own hand in the most barefaced way, and I must get my innings too. After all, though it sounds horribly low to say it, I did kill the fellow that was carrying her off, and bring her back."

"Of course you did. If that was all, you certainly deserve to win her."

"Yes; but then the Commissioner scores in having got hurt. He sees her for ever so long every day, and she is so awfully kind, talking to him and reading to him, and letting him prose away to her, that no wonder he thinks he is making splendid running. I only wish I had got hurt too."

"Do you really?" asked Georgia, with meaning in her tone.

"No, Mrs North, you're right; I don't. If we had both been hurt there would have been no one with the slightest chance of catching up the rascals. Whether she takes him or me in the end, I did save her, at any rate."

"Good," said Georgia encouragingly. "I like that spirit."

"Well, now you know how things stand. You see what an advantage the Kumpsioner Sahib is taking of her gratitude and your kindness, and you can guess how I feel about it. Tell me candidly, do you think I have the slightest chance? Why did you say that you hoped I had not understood my own feelings?"

"Simply because a waiting game is your only chance. Since you ask me, I will speak plainly. You are younger than Mabel, you know; it is undeniable, unfortunately"—as Fitz made a gesture

of impatience—"and Dick and I have got into the way of treating you like a son or a brother—a very much younger brother. We haven't taken you seriously, and I am very much afraid Mabel doesn't either. Mr Burgrave holds a very high position, and he is a man of great distinction. We on this frontier cherish an unfortunate prejudice against him, of course, but elsewhere he is considered most charming and fascinating. How can she but feel flattered by his homage? And he has undoubtedly acquired a great influence over her; I can't help seeing that. And yet I can't make out that she cares for him, and I have watched her closely."

"Well, that is one grain of comfort, at any rate," said Fitz disconsolately. "But he is not going to carry her off without my having the chance to say a word to her first, I can tell him."

Georgia looked up anxiously. "Don't throw away your only hope," she entreated. "What you have to do is to make yourself necessary to her. You have been managing very well hitherto—always ready to do anything she wanted. Make yourself so useful to her as a friend that she would rather keep you as a lover than lose you altogether."

"Oh, I say, Mrs North, you don't flatter a man's vanity much!"

"Yes, I do. At least, I am showing that I think you capable of a great deal of self-effacement for the sake of winning her."

"And if the Commissioner carries her off meanwhile?"

"I don't think he will, provided you let her alone. But if you worry her to have you, she may accept him

just to be rid of your attentions. And then there will be nothing to be done but to bear it like a man."

"You don't disguise the taste of your medicines much, Mrs Dr North. I'll chew the bitter pill as I ride, and try to look as if I liked it. I was to meet the Major at the old fort at ten o'clock. It's awfully good of you to have listened so patiently to my symptoms, and prescribed for me so fully."

He ran down the steps and rode away, arriving at the fort a little late, to find that Dick was already discussing with Colonel Graham the business on which they had come. A series of small thefts, irritating rather than serious, had occurred on the club premises of late, and the minds of the members were exercised over the question of their prevention in future. As Fitz rode up Dick and Colonel Graham were descending to the courtyard after making the round of the walls, and the former signed to him to wait where he was.

"I never remember such a succession of petty robberies before," said Colonel Graham. "The natives must be in a very unsettled state."

"I'm not sorry these things have happened," returned Dick. "In fact, I'm glad of it."

Colonel Graham glanced at him. "What have you got in your head?" he asked.

"Simply this. I suppose you believe, as I do, that the thief gets in by climbing over the wall, while the watchman is busy guarding the gateway, and never thinks that there is any other means of entering?"

"That's my idea. In a climate like this mud-brick is bound to go pretty soon if it isn't looked after,

and for years the rain has washed it down into these rubbish-heaps, till they are as good as so many flights of steps. What with the grass and bushes growing all about, it's as easy as possible to get in. I could do it myself."

"Then you agree that it would be as well to make it harder? I propose that we call a club meeting and invite subscriptions for the purpose of putting the walls into proper repair. Otherwise we shall soon have the place down on our heads."

"But that sort of thing will take a long time to organise."

"It needn't, since it's only to keep the natives from thinking there's anything up. So far as I can see, there's no particular reason why you and I shouldn't head the subscription list with a thousand rupees each—so that the most pressing work may be begun at once—or why that two thousand rupees shouldn't last out better than such a sum ever did before."

"Good! Are we to take the young fellows into our confidence?"

"Runcorn may as well know all about it. A sapper will be useful in deciding what it's possible to do in the time. Happily he and the canal people have kept the wall overlooking the water in tolerable repair. As for the other sides, we must clear away the rubbish from the foot of the walls, and build up the parapets where the bricks have weathered away. The bushes must go, naturally, and the ramparts be made a fairly safe promenade—for the ladies, of course. The tower stairs are awfully dangerous, and it will be quite natural to have

them seen to, and the floors and loopholes may as well be looked after while we are about it, though we shall never get a satisfactory flanking fire without rebuilding the whole thing. I shall take it upon myself to present the place with a new gate—not obtrusively martial in appearance, but with a certain reserve strength about it. My wife will think me a terrible Vandal for spoiling the beautiful ruin her father left behind him, but it's obvious that the *chaukidar* will be able to look after the place better when there's a gate to shut."

"I should say there won't be much ruin left when you have done with it," said Colonel Graham. "It's a mere coincidence that our largest godown turns out to be in the way of the canal extension works, and has been condemned. There would be no harm in storing the corn and a few other little trifles in the vaults under the club-house, and it would give us an excuse for posting a sentry here at night."

"Good," said Dick, in his turn. "What accomplished deceivers we shall be by the time this is over, if we live to see it!"

"You think things are in a bad way?"

"What do you think yourself?"

"I? I have no opinion. You have been on this frontier much longer than I have, and you are in political charge. I've seen enough to know that there's something queer going on, that's all."

"I'll tell you one thing that's going on. Five times in the last fortnight I have received secret information of tribal gatherings which were to be held without my knowledge. Of course I made

a point of turning up, and behaving just as if I had received an invitation in due form."

"Well, that was all right, so far."

"Yes, but think of the *jirgahs* that I did not hear of. What went on at them?"

"I see; it looks bad. What do you propose doing?"

"What ought to be done is to revive the martial law proclamation, which has been in abeyance for the last four years. But I am not supreme here just now."

"Surely the Commissioner would not interfere with the exercise of your authority?"

"The Commissioner has imbibed so many horrors about the Khemistan frontier that he is pleased every morning to find himself alive, and the house not burnt over his head. I believe he regards the improvement as due to his own presence here, and at the same time considers it an additional proof that Khemistan may now be governed like all the other provinces. If I had things my own way, my very first move would be to deport Burgrave, preferably to Simla, where he could both be happy himself and a cause of happiness to others, but as it is, he will probably deport me."

"Then you believe he has some trick on hand too?"

"I'm sure of it. He is in constant communication with Government. Beardmore and his clerks come to him every day"—Beardmore was the Commissioner's private secretary, and a man after his chief's own heart, of the type that considers it has successfully surmounted a crisis when it has drawn up a state-paper on the subject, and has no

inconvenient yearnings after energetic action—
 “and he is busy with them for hours, concocting
 a report on the state of the frontier, I suppose.
 When that is finished, we may expect the blow.”

“What is it that you expect exactly? A friend
 of mine at headquarters tells me there’s a persistent
 rumour——”

“That they intend to withdraw the subsidy, and
 cut loose from Nalapur? Just so. And that means
 the deluge for us. The blessed word Non-interven-
 tion will bring about the need for intervention,
 as usual.”

“Our people will rise?”

“Not at first. Bahram Khan will probably remove
 his uncle quietly, and in order to still any unpleasant
 rumours, encourage raids on us, which will serve
 the further purpose of awakening the appetite for
 blood and loot. The Sardars will be got to believe
 that we have only drawn back in order to advance
 better, and that their one chance is to make the
 first move. They will cross the border, and our
 people will join them.”

“And we shall be thankful for the fort? North,
 in view of all this, what do you say to sending the
 ladies down to Bab-us-Sahel for a while?”

“I don’t know,” answered Dick hesitatingly. “I
 thought of suggesting to my wife that she should
 go down there and do some shopping.”

“But you fancied she’d see through it? Prob-
 ably. She was born and bred here, and knows the
 weather-signs as well as you do. What’s the good
 of trying to throw dust in her eyes? Put it to her
 plainly that, as things are, you would feel much

happier if she was away, and she'll go like a shot. Your sister and my Flora will go with her, and they'll be a pleasant party."

"She won't like going when there's no sign of danger, and it might precipitate the crisis, too. Perhaps when Burgrave launches his thunderbolt——"

"If you could only get him to escort the ladies down at once, we might pull through yet."

"No fear," said Dick bitterly, "until he's done his worst."

CHAPTER X.

GAINING A LOVER AND KEEPING A FRIEND.

“No bathing to-day, Mab!” laughed Georgia, meeting Mabel in her riding-habit in the hall.

“You mean that we can’t ride? Why not?”

“Now you look just like the prehistoric lady in the picture! Because there’s a dust-storm coming on. I meant to tell you before, but you rushed away from the breakfast-table so quickly. I have been hurrying Dick off, that he may get to the office before it begins.”

“But how do you know there’s going to be a dust-storm at all? I thought that before they came on the sky was copper-coloured, and the air got like an oven?”

“Well, the sky is getting black, as you can see. Dust-storms here are not confined to the hot weather, they come all the year round. It’s the merest chance that there hasn’t been one yet since you arrived.”

“How horrid that it should come just to-day!” said Mabel snappishly. “I told Mr Anstruther I was tired of riding Simorgh, and he must really bring Laili back. He said he couldn’t be sure she was cured yet, and I told him he might use a leading-rein if he liked, but that I meant to ride her. We

weren't going at all near the frontier, or anywhere in the direction of Dera Gul."

"My beloved Mab, dust-storms don't respect British territory, and if you had once been out in one you wouldn't wish to repeat the experience, even if you were in a position to do it. Go and take your habit off, and when Mr Anstruther comes, I will tell him to send the horses to the stables, and wait here until the storm is over. Then you will have some one to talk to. See that the servants shut all your windows."

But when Mabel emerged again from her darkened room into the lighted hall, the disappointment caused by the loss of her ride was mingled with a certain amount of ill-humour, due to an even more untoward occurrence. The ayah Tara had chosen this particular morning for passing in review all her mistress's best gowns and hats, with an eye to any little repairs that might be necessary, and having taken the garments from their respective boxes and spread them out all over the room, had sat down to contemplate them for a while before setting to work. She was not accustomed to the peculiarities of the Khemistan climate, and the gathering darkness appeared to her only as the precursor of a thunderstorm. Hence, when the first gust of raging wind whirled a cloud of gritty dust through the open windows, she was as much astonished as Mabel herself, who was entering the room at the moment, and was almost knocked down. Both mistress and maid flew at once to shut the windows, but in the wind and darkness this was by no means an easy task, and before it could

be accomplished the dust lay thick all over the room and its contents. Such a *contretemps* was enough to provoke a saint, Mabel said to herself angrily, when she had left the weeping Tara to do what she could to repair the mischief, and it would be idle to deny that she was feeling very cross indeed as she entered the drawing-room with a bundle of letters in her hand.

The shutters were closed and the lamps lighted as if it were night, and the dust pattered like hail on the verandah whenever the howling of the wind would allow any other sound to be heard. Fitz Anstruther was sitting near the fireplace, looking through an old magazine, and Mabel, rejecting his suggestion of a game of chess, seated herself at the writing-table, saying that she must finish her letters for the mail. She found it difficult to write, however, for although she would not look up, she could not help being conscious that her companion's eyes were much oftener fixed on her than on the printed page before him. Accustomed though she was to such homage from men, this time it made her nervous, and at last she could bear it no longer.

"Wouldn't you like something to do?" she demanded suddenly, turning round and catching him in the act of looking at her, but he was equal to the occasion.

"Something to do? Something for you, do you mean? May I really write your letters for you? I'm sure the Major has given me plenty of practice in that sort of thing, and your friends would be so surprised to find you had set up a private secretary."

"Thanks, but I don't seem to be in the mood for letter-writing, and certainly not for dictating."

"Then may I hold a skein of silk for you to wind? That's the sort of thing they set a mere man down to in books."

"I don't use silk of that sort. Is there nothing you would like to do?"

"Yes, awfully. I should like to talk to you."

"I think I shall go and read to the Commissioner," severely.

"It would only be wasting sweetness on the desert air. He's perfectly happy at this moment, with Beardmore plotting treason in a confidential report, and about six clerks writing away for him as hard as they can write, and he wouldn't appreciate an interruption."

"I suppose you are judging Mr Burgrave by yourself when you say he will be happier if I keep away?"

"I? Oh no; I was judging him by himself. The Kumpsioner Sahib doesn't think ladies and affairs of state go well together, you know."

"Indeed?" Mabel was bitterly conscious that she bore a grudge against the Commissioner for this very reason, but she had no intention of admitting the fact.

"Why, do you mean that he vouchsafes to talk shop to you alone, out of all the world of women? What an important person you are, Miss North! Think of having the run of the Commissioner's state secrets! But of course one can see why he does it. How unfairly people are dealt with in this world! Why have I no official secrets to confide? Sup-

posing I spy round and amass some, may I expound them to you for three or four hours a day?"

"What nonsense!" said Mabel, with some warmth. "Mr Burgrave is only teaching me to appreciate Browning."

"And you fly to state secrets for relief in the intervals! Miss North, won't you teach me to appreciate Browning? I'll wire to Bombay at once for the whole twenty-nine volumes, if you will."

"I really have no time to waste——"

"Oh, how unkind! Consider the crushing effect of your words. Do you truly think me such an idiot that teaching me would be waste of time?"

Mabel laughed in spite of herself. "You didn't let me finish my sentence," she said. "I was going to say that it would be only waste of your time, too, to try to learn anything from me."

"Never! Say the word, and I enrol myself your pupil for ever."

"You must have a very poor opinion of me as a teacher, I'm afraid, if you think it would take a lifetime to turn you out a finished scholar."

"How you do twist a man's words! The fault would be on my side, of course. I was going to say the misfortune, but it would be good fortune for me," Fitz added, in a low voice.

("Now, if I don't keep my head, something will happen!" said Mabel to herself, conscious that the atmosphere was becoming electric.) Aloud she remarked lightly, "Ah, you have given yourself away. Do you think I would have anything to do with a pupil who was determined not to learn?"

"Not if he has learnt all you can teach him?"

demanded Fitz, rising and coming towards her. "Please understand that there is nothing more for me to learn. I want to teach you."

"Oh, thanks! but I haven't offered myself as a pupil," with a nervous laugh.

"No, it's the other way about. I want to teach you to care for me as you have made me care for you. Well, not like that, perhaps; I couldn't expect it. But you do care for me a little, don't you?"

"Mr Anstruther!—I am astonished—" stammered Mabel.

"Are you really? What a bad teacher I must be! I know all the other men are wild after you, of course, but I thought it was different, somehow, between you and me, as if—well, almost as if we were made for each other, as people say. I have felt something of the sort from the very first. I love you, Mabel, and I think you do like me rather, don't you? You have been so awfully kind in letting me do things for you, and it has driven all the rest mad with envy. I believe I could make you love me in time, if you would let me try. There's nothing in the whole world I wouldn't do for you. If only you won't shut your heart up against me, I think you'll have to give in."

He was holding her hands tightly as he spoke, and Mabel trembled under the rush of his words. Was she going to faint, or what was the meaning of that wild throbbing at her heart? Clearly she must act decisively and at once, or this tempestuous young man would think he had taken her by storm. She summoned hastily the remnants of her pride.

"Please go and sit down over there," she said,

freeing her hands from his grasp. "How can I think properly when you are towering over me like that?" Fitz did not offer to move, and by way of redressing the inequality, she rose also, supporting herself by laying a shaking hand upon the writing-table. "I am so very sorry and—and surprised about this. I had no idea——"

"None?" he asked.

"I mean I never thought it would go as far as this—that you would be so persistent—so much in earnest."

"A new light on the matter, evidently." As she grew more agitated, Fitz had become calmer.

"Because it's impossible, you know."

"Excuse me, I don't know anything of the kind."

"You are a great deal younger than I am, for one thing."

"Barely three years, and it's a fault that will mend."

"No, it won't. As you get older, I shall get old faster, and if there is a thing I detest, it is to see a young man with an elderly wife. I could not endure to feel that I was growing old while you were still in the prime of life. You would hate it yourself, too, and you would leave off caring for me, and we should both be miserable."

"Try me!" said Fitz, with a light in his eyes that she could not meet.

"And then there's another thing," she went on hurriedly. "I know it sounds horrid to say it, but—it's not only that three years—you are so young for your age. I'm not a reasonable creature like

Georgia ; I simply long to be made to obey, whether I like it or not. I feel that I want a master, but I could make you do what I liked."

"Could you? But perhaps I could make you do what I liked. Just look at me for a moment."

But Mabel covered her eyes. "No, I won't. It sounds as if I had been inviting you to master me, which wouldn't be at all what I meant. Please understand, once for all, that I don't care for you enough to marry you."

"Very well. But you will one day. If I am young, there's one good thing about it—I can wait."

"It's no good whatever your thinking that I shall change."

"That is my business, please. I presume my thoughts are my own? and I feel that I shall teach you to love me yet."

"I shouldn't have thought," said Mabel indignantly, "that it was like you to persecute a woman who had refused you."

"Don't be afraid. I shall not persecute you; I shall simply wait."

"And try to make me miserable by looking doleful? I call that persecution, just the same. No, really, if you are going to be so disagreeable, I shall have to speak to my brother, and ask him to get you transferred somewhere else, and that would be very bad for your prospects."

Mabel thought that this threat sounded extremely telling, but to Fitz, who had declined excellent posts in other parts of the province, rather than quit the frontier which grows to have such a strange

fascination for every Khemistan man, it was less alarming.

“Don’t trouble to get protection from the Major, Miss North. I assure you it won’t be necessary.”

“But am I to be kept in perpetual dread of having to discuss this—this unpleasant subject? I think it is very unkind of you,” said Mabel, with tears in her eyes, “for I had come to like you so much as a friend, and you were always so useful, and now——”

“And now I intend to be quite as useful, and just as much your friend, I hope, as before. Let us make a bargain. You may feel quite safe. I won’t attempt to approach the unpleasant subject without your leave.”

Mabel looked at him in astonishment. “But I should never give you leave, you know,” she said.

“As you please. Then the subject will never be renewed. I am content to wait.”

“But what is the good of waiting when I have told you——”

“Come, I don’t think you can deny me that consolation, can you, when you have the whole thing in your own hands? Is it a bargain?”

“It doesn’t seem fair to let you go on hoping——”

“That’s my own lookout,” he said again. “If your friend is always at hand when you want him, surely he may be allowed to nurse his foolish hopes in private—provided that he never exhibits them?”

“Very well, then,” said Mabel reluctantly. “But I don’t feel——”

“If I am satisfied, surely you may be?”

The entrance of a servant to unbar the shutters dispensed with the need of an answer. Preoccupied

as they had been during the last half-hour, neither Fitz nor Mabel had noticed that the dust had ceased to patter and the wind to howl. The storm was over, and once again there was daylight, although rain was descending in torrents.

“Mab, the Commissioner was asking for you,” said Georgia, pausing as she passed the door. “He has finished his morning’s work, and wanted to know if you were ready for some Browning.”

“Oh yes, I’ll go at once,” said Mabel, anxious only to escape from Fitz and the memory of their agitating conversation. It had shaken her a good deal, she felt, and this made her angry with him. What right had he to disturb her so rudely, and make her feel guilty, when she had done nothing? It was with distinct relief that she met Mr Burgrave’s benignant smile, and returned his morning greeting. He did not appear to notice any perturbation in her manner, and she took up the book, and turned hastily to the page where they had left off, while Mr Burgrave, pencil in hand, settled himself comfortably among his cushions, ready to call attention to any beauties she might miss in reading the lines. If he was like Fitz, in that his eyes were fixed on the fair head bent over the pages of “Pippa Passes,” he was unlike Fitz in that their gaze escaped unnoticed.

“‘You’ll love me yet!—and I can marry—’” read Mabel, totally unconscious of the havoc she was making of the poet’s words, but her auditor almost sprang from his couch.

“No, no!” he cried. “I beg your pardon, Miss North, but the storm has shaken your nerves a little, hasn’t it? Allow me,” and he took the book

from her hands, and read the poem aloud in a voice so full of feeling that it went to Mabel's heart.

“ ‘ You'll love me yet !—and I can tarry
Your love's protracted growing ;
June reared that bunch of flowers you carry
From seeds of April's sowing.

‘ I plant a heartfelt now ; some seed
At least is sure to strike—’ ”

What malign influence had brought the reading to this point just now ? Fitz might have used those very words. Involuntarily Mabel rose and stood at the edge of the verandah, looking out into the rain. Her eyes were filled with tears, but she stood with her back to Mr Burgrave, and he did not see them. He read on—

“ ‘ And yield—what you'll not pluck indeed,
Not love, but, maybe, like.

‘ You'll look at least on love's remains,
A grave's one violet ;
Your look ?—that pays a thousand pains.
What's death ? You'll love me yet ! ’ ”

Was the seed springing already ? A tear splashed into the gritty dust that lay on the verandah-rail, and Mabel dashed her hand across her eyes in an agony of shame. Mr Burgrave must have seen ; what would he think ? But before she could even reach her handkerchief, the book was thrown down, and Mr Burgrave had seized his crutch, and was at her side.

“ Mabel, my dear little girl ! ” he cried tenderly.

“ Oh no, no ; not you ! ” she gasped, horror-stricken.

“And why not, dearest? Forgive me for blundering so brutally. How could I guess that the seed I had dared to plant was blossoming already? I have watched it growing slowly day by day, so slowly that I was often afraid it had not struck at all, and now, when it is actually in full flower, I pass by without seeing it, and bruise it in this heartless way. Forgive me, dear.”

“Indeed, indeed you are making a mistake!” cried Mabel, in a panic. “It really isn’t what you think, Mr Burgrave. I don’t care for you in that way at all.”

“My dear girl must allow me to be the judge of that. I can read your heart better than you can read it for yourself, dearest. Do you think I haven’t noticed how naturally you turn to me for refuge against trouble and unkindness? It has touched me inexpressibly. Again and again you have sought sympathy from me, with the sweetest confidence.”

“It’s quite true!” groaned Mabel, seeing in a sudden mental vision all the occasions to which Mr Burgrave alluded.

“Of course it is, dear. You hadn’t realised how completely you trusted me, had you? Other people thought—no, I won’t tell you what they said—but I knew better. I was sure of you, you see.”

“What did other people say?” asked Mabel, with faint interest.

“Er—well, it was a lady in the neighbourhood.” Mabel’s thoughts flew to Mrs Hardy with natural apprehension. “She was good enough to warn me that you were—no, I will not say the word—that you were amusing yourself with me. She had noticed,

naturally enough, how inevitably we drew together, but she ascribed your sweet trustfulness to such vile motives as could never enter your head. I said to her, 'Madam, to defend Miss North against your suspicions would be to insult her. In a short time, when you realise their baselessness, you will suffer as keenly as you deserve for having entertained them.' I could trust my little girl, you see."

"Oh, you make me ashamed!" cried Mabel, abashed by the perfect confidence with which this stern, self-sufficient man regarded her. "Oh, Mr Burgrave, do please believe I am not good enough for you. It makes me miserable to think how disappointed you will be."

"I should like to hear you call me Eustace," said Mr Burgrave softly, unmoved by her protestations. It occurred to Mabel, with a dreadful sense of helplessness, that he regarded them only as deprecating properly the honour he proposed doing her.

"Well—please—Eustace—" But Mr Burgrave kissed her solemnly on the forehead, and she could stand no more.

"It's too much! I'll come back presently," she gasped, and succeeded in escaping. As she fled through the hall she met Georgia.

"Perhaps you'll be interested to know that I'm engaged to Mr Burgrave, Georgie!" she cried hysterically, rushing into her own room and locking the door.

"That wretched man!" cried Georgia. "After all Dr Tighe and I have done for his leg!"

"Didn't know Tighe had any grievance against

him about this," grumbled Dick. He was sitting on the edge of the dressing-table, ruefully contemplating his boots, with his hands dug deep in his pockets. On ordinary occasions Georgia would have requested him, gently but firmly, to move, but now she was too much perturbed in mind to think of the furniture. Delayed in starting by the dust-storm, Dick had only returned from a hard day's riding late at night, to find himself confronted on the threshold, so to speak, by the triumphant Commissioner, and requested to give him his sister.

"Oh, but he would be on our side, of course," said Georgia. "Dick, I do think it is horrid of Mr Burgrave to have proposed under present circumstances. It's as if he wanted to rob us of everything—even of Mab."

"No, he's doing us an honour. He all but told me so. But he really is absolutely gone on Mab. His whole face changes when he speaks of her. Fact is, Georgie, if the man didn't come rooting about on our very own frontier, I couldn't help having a sneaking liking for him. His belief in his own greatness is perfectly sincere, and he cherishes no animosity against us for opposing his plans. He told me that he hoped political differences would make no break in our friendly intercourse—Hang it! this thing's giving way. Why in the world don't you have stronger tables?"

"Sit here," said Georgia, pointing to the wicker sofa. "Well, Dick?"

"Well? It's coming, old girl, coming fast, and he's mercifully trying to soften the blow to us."

Georgia looked round with a shiver. The shabby

bungalow with its makeshift furniture was the outward and visible sign of the life-work which she and her husband had inherited from her father, and it was to be taken from them by the action of the man who hoped that his arbitrary decree would be no obstacle to their continuing to regard him as a friend.

“And what I think is,” Dick went on, “that they had better be married as soon as possible, before Burgrave goes down to the river again, and the blow falls.”

“But, Dick,” Georgia almost screamed, “you’re giving her no time to repent.”

“Repent? I’m not proposing to kill her. Surely it would be better for her to be married from this house than from a Bombay hotel? Besides, we should have no further anxiety about her——”

“No further anxiety? Dick, if she marries him I shall never know another happy moment. She doesn’t care a straw for him—it’s a kind of fascination, that’s all, a sort of deadly terror. I can’t tell you what it’s been like all day. She couldn’t bear me to leave them alone a moment, and there was he beaming at her, and not seeing it a bit. He thinks it’s all right for her to be shy and tongue-tied, and not dare to meet his eye—the pompous idiot! Mab shy—and with a man! She’s miserable—in fear of her life.”

“No, no, Georgie, that’s a little too thick. Mab is not a schoolgirl, to let herself be coerced into an engagement, and it won’t do to stir her up to break it off. You mustn’t go and abuse him to her. Be satisfied with relieving your feelings to me.”

“ Now, Dick, is it likely ? Am I the person to give her an extra reason for sticking to him ? If I abused him she would feel bound to defend him, and might even end by caring for him. I can't pretend to congratulate her on her choice, but she shall have every facility for seeing as much of him as she can possibly want.”

“ Vengeful creature ! ”

“ No, that's not it. I have no patience with her.”

“ Ah, she has proved you a false prophet, hasn't she ? That's unpardonable.”

“ She has done worse ; I'm perfectly convinced that she refused the right man before accepting the wrong one. And though she doesn't deserve it, I think she ought to have time to get things put right, if she can.”

“ Very well. Then the deluge will come first, that's all.”

“ How soon do you expect it ? ”

“ Well, I gather from what the Commissioner says that his report is nearly drawn up. As it's only a pretext for a predetermined move, they won't take long to consider it. The decision will be intimated to me, and I shall submit my resignation in return.”

“ And then we shall fold our tents like the Arabs, and silently steal away ? ”

“ Not quite at once. We must stick on until they send up a man to replace me, and carry out the new policy. The worst of it will be that Ashraf Ali will know why I am resigning, and unless I can get him to keep quiet, he will think himself free to break the treaty before our side does. If Bahram Khan once gets to know what's on hand, it's all up, for nothing

will persuade the Sardars that we are not repudiating the treaty as the first step to an invasion and the annexation of Nalapur, and he will be there to lead them, if the Amir won't. I hope to goodness that Burgrave will have removed the light of his countenance from us before then, but I suppose that's sure to be all right. He would hardly like to look as if he was hounding his intended brother-in-law out of the province. Unfortunately it's pretty certain that rumours of my impending departure will begin to get about in some mysterious manner as soon as his unfavourable report goes up, for his plans seem doomed to leak out into the bazaar. I'm inclined to think he has a spy about him somewhere. By-the-bye, Georgie, who is the sweetseller you've allowed to hang about the place lately? "

" I, Dick? He told me you had said he might come."

" Something fishy there, evidently. But he must have an accomplice inside."

" One of the Commissioner's Hindu clerks, perhaps."

" Possibly. Well, we'll deal with him to-morrow."

CHAPTER XI.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

As soon as Dick awoke in the morning, his talk with Georgia recurred to his mind, and looking out of his dressing-room window, he called to Ismail Bakhsh, whom he saw in the compound. From his long connection with the family, the old soldier was regarded as the head of the household staff.

“Has that sweetseller turned up yet, Ismail Bakhsh?”

“No, sahib, I have not seen him this morning.”

“Well, when he does, you can detain him. I want to ask him a question or two.”

“The thing is done, sahib. If the protector of the poor would listen to a word from this unworthy one——”

“Yes; what is it?”

“It was in my mind yesterday, sahib, to examine all the verandahs, lest the storm should have shaken the pillars, and in so doing I found that the work of the rats under the floors has been great and very evil. Surely there are many places in which the planks are loose and easy to be moved, but on this side of the house it is the worst. Before the Kumpsoner Sahib’s

rooms a man might even squeeze himself in and hide under the verandah floor."

"We shall never get rid of the rats until we have proper cement floors—and it's no good thinking of that now," added Dick, half to himself. "But are you sure there's nothing worse than rats about, Ismail Bakhsh? I don't like the idea of that hole."

"I also suspected evil, sahib, but having sent two of the servants' sons in with lights, I was content when they found nothing."

"I hope you nailed the boards firmly into their places?"

"I put them back, sahib, but why fasten them? There was no man inside, and in case any should seek to enter, the hole should be blocked up from within, not from without. Moreover, if the protector of the poor would invite Winlock Sahib to bring his sporting dog to the house, with your honour's own dogs we might succeed in killing all the rats before mending the floors."

"Good idea! Ask the memsahib to give you a *chit* to Winlock Sahib. No; it had better be to-morrow. I shall be out all to-day."

Ismail Bakhsh salaamed and departed, and Dick returned to his dressing, neither of them dreaming that they were separated by nothing but a half-inch plank from a man who had listened to the whole of their colloquy. The bungalow, which had never been intended for a permanent dwelling, had been run up in haste. Hence the contrast of its somewhat ramshackle appearance with that of the substantial stone houses in the cantonments, and hence also the

perpetual worry caused by the colonies of rats inhabiting the space under the floors, which should have been filled up with concrete. However, since innumerable complaints and remonstrances had brought nothing but vague promises and an occasional snub from those in authority, Dick and Georgia continued to live on in their unsatisfactory dwelling, and to wage intermittent warfare against the rats. But the rats could not fairly be accused of the worst of the damage of which Ismail Bakhsh complained, for crouched under the boards lay the sweetseller, who had effected an entrance by sliding out one of the planks from the front of the verandah and pulling another aside, returning them to their places when he had crawled in. His dark face paled when Ismail Bakhsh suggested bringing the dogs, but when he heard Dick postpone the rat-hunt to the next day, he breathed freely again.

“To-day is all I want,” he said to himself. “When I have once got the paper for Jehanara Bibi from that accursed half-blood my work is done, and Nāth Sahib may set his dogs on my track as much as he likes—and his sowars too.”

He remained crouched in his lair all morning, until the Commissioner had dismissed his clerks and hobbled round to the other side of the house to look for Mabel. As soon as the sound of his crutch had become inaudible in the distance, there was a hesitating tap on one of the loose boards. It was answered by a bolder knock from below, the board was pushed slightly aside, and a yellow hand, trembling as if with ague, passed a roll of papers through the crack. The sweetseller seized it, and pressed the

fingers of the transmitter, which were hurriedly withdrawn. The hidden man secreted the papers carefully in his clothing, and crawled round to the front of the house, whence he could watch through a peep-hole all that went on in this part of the compound. When noon was come, and the servants had all betaken themselves to their own quarters, he removed the sliding plank and slipped out, bringing with him his stock in trade, and replaced the board carefully. Having assured himself that Dick was nowhere to be seen, he crossed the compound boldly, climbed the wall at a point where various projecting stones and convenient hollows afforded a foothold, and walked with dignified haste to the nearest sandhill. On the further side of this he buried his tray and his sweets in the sand, and then, girding up his loins, set out resolutely in the direction of Dera Gul.

Dusk had already fallen when he reached the fortress, where he received a respectful greeting from the ragged guards, who informed him that the chief was in his zenana. As soon as the news was brought that Narayan Singh had returned, however, Bahram Khan sent word that he should be admitted immediately—a high honour which was not seldom the reward of the indispensable spy. Committing himself to the guidance of one of the slave-boys, Narayan Singh passed behind the curtain and into the anteroom, to discover Bahram Khan reclining upon the divan in the easiest possible undress. The pleasant murmur of the hubble-bubble, as he approached, prepared the visitor to find the room full of smoke, and his master seemed at first too

much engrossed with his pipe to notice his entrance. Cross-legged in the corner sat the Eurasian Jehanara, shrouded in her veil, her glittering eyes reflecting the faint light which was shed by a brazier of glowing charcoal.

“Peace, Narayan Singh!” said the Prince at last, taking the mouthpiece of the long leathern tube lazily from his lips. “Is all well?”

“All is well, Highness. I have here a copy of the report of Barkaraf Sahib to the Sarkar, from the hands of his confidential clerk.”

Jehanara laughed harshly. “Thou hadst but little difficulty with Antonio D’Costa?” she said.

“What knowest thou of the swine?” asked Bahram Khan jealously.

“I have not seen him for many years, Highness, but he is my cousin, and I was acquainted with his character as a youth, and heard of his doings as a man. Knowing thy desire to learn the intentions of the Kumpsioner Sahib, and hearing that my cousin was in his employ, it needed only that I should instruct the skilful Narayan Singh to approach him in the right way.”

“And I,” said Narayan Singh, “needed but to hold before his eyes the copies of the bonds I had obtained from certain moneylenders, and threaten to show them to Barkaraf Sahib, when he fell down on his knees before me, and was ready to do whatever I might desire, for fear of the ruin that threatened him.”

“It is well,” growled Bahram Khan. “But what does the report say?”

Narayan Singh took out the papers which had

been handed to him in his hiding-place, and laid them on the floor before Jehanara. She took them up, and leaning forward, scrutinised the contents eagerly by the dim light of the brazier.

“In this report,” she said, with deep satisfaction, “which the Kumpsioner Sahib has just finished drawing up, he recommends the immediate withdrawal of the subsidy, and the recall of Beltring Sahib from Nalapur, on the ground that the treaty was merely a temporary arrangement, the necessity for which has passed away.” Bahram Khan laughed, and she went on. “The Amir Sahib is to be assured of the continuous friendship and goodwill of the Sarkar, which with the one hand will take away his rupees, and with the other present him with the liberty to govern his people without interference or guidance.”

“Truly the infidels are delivered into our hands !” cried Bahram Khan. “And when is the change to be announced ?”

“The Kumpsioner Sahib desires an order, which may be carried out by the political officer on the spot.”

“Then the fool himself is leaving the border ? Let him go. I care not to take his life. He has been a useful friend to me, and may be permitted to carry his folly elsewhere. It is Nāth Sahib that I want, and surely even my uncle will turn against him when he knows that the Sarkar has determined to break the treaty.”

“Gently, Highness !” entreated Jehanara. “The Amir Sahib is ever faithful to his friends, and not easily turned from his allegiance. Such is his

friendship for Nāth Sahib that the only thing that would make him join in the plot would be the hope of benefiting him."

"But," put in Narayan Singh, who had been wondering uncomfortably whether it would be better to tell his news at once, or to wait until he had managed to secure a moment's private conversation with Jehanara, "I heard tidings yesterday, Highness, which seem to show that the Kumpsioner Sahib is not the friend thou didst reckon him. I could have told them sooner, but I fear they will not be pleasing in thine ears."

"Let us hear them," cried Bahram Khan, while Jehanara shot an angry glance at the spy. He ought to have known by this time that it was generally wiser to soften and sweeten agitating news, and not to administer it undiluted.

"It was said among the servant-people that Barkaraf Sahib had asked Nāth Sahib for his sister, Highness, and that even now he has betrothed her to him."

There was a moment's incredulous silence, and then Bahram Khan sprang up from the divan, sending the heavy cut glass bottle of the water-pipe flying, and almost overturning the brazier. "And this is the fruit of your counsel, both of you!" he shouted. "Who was it that held me back when I would have fallen on the whole company of the English as they returned from their fool's dinner in the desert, and killed them all, except Nāth Sahib's sister? Who was it again that bade me suffer my servants to be taken prisoners and held captive, and be tried for their lives by a boy, and that told me

to rejoice when I received them back unharmed? Thou, O woman! thou, dog of an idolater! Surely ye were in league with the Kumpsioner Sahib to steal the girl from me, and he has bribed you to blacken my face in the eyes of all my people."

"Highness," said Jehanara, with dignity, "thine anger has made thee unjust to thy faithful servants. Fear not; I know the ways of the English, and this betrothal need not lead to marriage for many months. Nāth Sahib's sister shall yet be thine, and the Kumpsioner Sahib may wait in vain for his bride."

"Wait!" cried Bahram Khan, sinking again upon his cushions, "nay, he shall wait for nothing but death. He shall die by inches, and before my eyes, because he has sought to befool me. If he escapes, the lives of both of you shall pay for it."

"As thou wilt, Highness. But was it not thy admiration of her beauty which first showed the Kumpsioner Sahib that the girl was fair? Suffer thy servant to consider the matter for a moment, and she will offer thee her counsel."

Leaving Bahram Khan to look at affairs in this new light, Jehanara established herself again in her corner, gazing fixedly into the hot coals. Both her life and that of Narayan Singh were at stake, and she knew it; and she had no desire to die. Six years before she had played a desperate game with Bahram Khan, conscious that in him she faced an opponent as cunning and as faithless as herself. The conditions were unequal, for she staked far more than he did, and he won, possibly because her sense

of the risk she was running had robbed her of the perfect coolness necessary to insure success. He had not married her, even by Mohammedan rites, and nothing short of full legal recognition could have vindicated in the eyes of her own people the course she had pursued. Robbed of her anticipated triumph, she made no attempt to escape the consequences, but set herself by every means in her power to obtain that ascendancy over the Prince's mind which she had failed to gain over his heart. Fresh failures and unspeakable mortifications had awaited her. The women of the household, from the beautiful little Ethiopian bride to whom was awarded the position Jehanara had intended for herself, to the humblest hill-girl who had been kidnapped to become at once a slave and a Muslimeh, saw to it that she ate the bread of bitterness; but in spite of taunts and revilings she kept the one end in view until her persistence was crowned with complete success. Bahram Khan would listen to no advice but hers, having learnt by experience that his confidence in her was justified. The intrigue by which first the Commissioner, and then the Viceroy, had been convinced of his wrongs, was of her devising, and had proved so successful as to convince her that had it not been for Dick's opposition, she would already have seen Bahram Khan established as his uncle's heir. It followed that her hatred for Dick, heightened by his cavalier treatment of herself, was at least as strong as that of the disappointed claimant. As she sat brooding over the charcoal at this moment, there was a cruel light in her eyes while she ran hastily over the points of the scheme which had

sprung full-grown into her mind when Bahram Khan accused her of treachery.

“Highness,” she said at last, and Bahram Khan propped himself up on his cushions with a muttered growl, while the trembling Narayan Singh appeared to take fresh interest in life, “this perfidy of the Kumpsioner Sahib’s provides thee with what was most needed, a means of involving the Amir Sahib in our plans. Nay, through this treachery, with the blessing of Heaven, thy servants will yet behold thee seated upon his throne, with the sanction of the Sarkar.”

“Wonderful!” cried the Prince, with gleaming eyes. “Go on.”

“First of all, then, Highness, the Kumpsioner Sahib must not leave Alibad before the treaty is broken—but we will consider presently by what means he may be induced to remain on the border. Next, instructions must be sent to the Vizier Ram Singh to represent thy quarrel to his master, the Amir Sahib, in this wise. Thou wilt say that the Kumpsioner Sahib, with a great show of friendliness, promised to get thee Nāth Sahib’s sister for a wife, but that he has befooled thee, and demanded the maiden for himself. Thine uncle may not altogether believe that Barkaraf Sahib really offered thee his help in the matter”—the half-caste could not restrain a touch of scorn as she glanced through her eyelashes at the miserable native who had brought himself to believe that an Englishman looked favourably on his desire to marry an Englishwoman. “Still, he has doubtless heard through his sister, thy mother, of thy love for the girl, and he will

soon hear also that she is betrothed to the Kump-sioner Sahib, so that he cannot but believe in the enmity between him and thee. Next thou wilt say that by setting spies on this enemy of thine thou hast learnt that he has persuaded the Sarkar to withdraw the subsidy. This he does in order to gain honour for himself by annexing the Nalapur state, and also that he may overthrow Nāth Sahib, whom thine uncle loves, and who, as we know through Ram Singh, has sworn to resign his office rather than forsake his friend. Thus, then, thine uncle will be eager to champion Nāth Sahib's cause against Bar-karaf Sahib, and thou, forgetting thine old hatred in the new, will show him the way. According to the words of this paper of my cousin's, the Sarkar's change of policy will be announced at a durbar to be held by Nāth Sahib in the Agency at Nalapur, and the Amir Sahib will do well to see to it that this durbar is not held. If we devise a means for keeping the Kump-sioner Sahib here, he must needs hold the durbar himself, and while he and Nāth Sahib, and all the sahibs from Alibad, are entangled in the mountains on the way to the city, they must be caught in an ambush of the Amir Sahib's troops. The Kump-sioner Sahib may well be killed in the first onset, to save all further trouble, but Nāth Sahib and the other friends of thine uncle need only be disarmed and kept prisoners, the writing of the Sarkar being taken from them. Then the Amir Sahib may send a peaceful message to the Sarkar that, hearing rumours of evil intended against him, he has seized a number of its officers and holds them as hostages, until he shall be assured that his fears

are groundless. So then the Sarkar, fearing for the lives of its sahibs, will send some great person to reassure his Highness, and explain that it was the evil doings of the dead Barkaraf Sahib alone that caused the mischief, and Nāth Sahib will be put in his place, and the subsidy continued, and all be well—save, perhaps, the payment of a slight fine for the accidental slaying of the Kumpsioner Sahib.”

“But what is the good of all this to me?” bellowed Bahram Khan. “It would rid me of the Kumpsioner Sahib, but no more—nay, it makes Nāth Sahib the head where he is now the tail.”

“Seest thou not, Highness, that this is the plot as it must appear in the eyes of thine uncle? Now lift the veil, and behold it as it is in thine own mind. Who should naturally be chosen to command the force lying in ambush but the Sardar Abd-ul-Nabi, and is he not a close friend of the Vizier Ram Singh, and wholly devoted to thy cause? To him the Amir Sahib will give orders that he is to slay no one but Barkaraf Sahib, and that the lives of the rest are to be saved, even at the risk of his own, but from thee he will receive the command to slay all and spare none, not even the youngest.”

“Nay, I will ride with them, and smite them myself from behind!” cried Bahram Khan.

“That must not be, Highness. Thou wilt be far away at the time.”

“Then Nāth Sahib and Barkaraf Sahib shall be saved alive and brought to me that I may see them die.”

“The risk is too great, Highness. Hast thou

forgotten the day when Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib was attacked in a certain nullah and all his escort slain, and how he fought his way out alone and rode back to his camp, and returning, as if upon eagles' wings, with a fresh body of troops, fell upon the tribesmen when they were stripping the dead, and slew them every one? Not a man shall live—be content with that, for there is other work for thee than watching their blood flow.”

“ And what is that, woman ? ”

“ Thou wilt be waiting here, Highness, and as soon as a swift messenger brings thee word that the sahibs have been attacked, thou wilt ride with all speed to Alibad. Knowing that all the sahibs are away except the Padri and two or three others who are not warriors, and that there is no place of refuge for them, thou wilt hasten thither to save them and the memsahibs. If they receive thy professions of friendship, then all is well—they are delivered into our hands. But it is in my mind that they will not trust thee, and that is even better, for then all the evil that follows will spring from their own lack of confidence. The men of the regiment who are left behind will fortify themselves in their lines, but there is no need to attack them just then. The bazaar and the European houses will be fired—by the *badmashes* of the place, doubtless—and in the turmoil and confusion all the sahibs will be killed, but all men will behold thee rushing hither and thither like one possessed, commanding thy soldiers with curses to save the white men alive.”

Bahram Khan chuckled grimly, for the picture appealed to him.

“And at last,” went on Jehanara, “seeing that thou canst do nothing, so few are thy men, thou wilt retire sorrowfully, taking with thee such women and loot as may come in thy way—but only for safe keeping.” Bahram Khan chuckled again. “The next day, when the Amir Sahib learns that he has indeed raised his hand against the Sarkar, and slain so many sahibs, he will be plunged in despair. He will find it impossible to keep his army in check, and they will come to Alibad and complete the work begun by thee, before ravaging the rest of the frontier. All will be the deed of thine uncle, and he it is that will have to answer to the Sarkar.”

“True, O woman. Trust me to see that his evil deeds shall blot out mine. But how if Nāth Sahib’s sister should chance to be slain also?”

“Her safety is thy care, Highness. Before seeking to save the sahibs, thou wilt have seized Nāth Sahib’s house, which is on the outskirts of the town, and sent off his wife and sister here, for their better protection, under a sufficient guard.”

“Who will see that Nāth Sahib’s Mem troubles us no more,” laughed Bahram Khan.

“Not so, Highness. The doctor lady must find safety with the Moti-ul-Nissa.”

“Nay, is she not Nāth Sahib’s wife?” cried Bahram Khan, much injured.

“There must be sanctuary for the doctor lady with thy mother,” repeated Jehanara firmly. “What harm can she do thee, Highness?”

“She is Sinjāj Kīlin’s daughter. That is enough.”

“True, Highness, and for that very reason she must live. The Begum must be warned to hide

her in the inmost recesses of the zenana, since the Amir Sahib clamours for her blood, and she herself must clearly understand that thou art protecting her at the risk of thy life. See here, Highness, and think not it is any love for thy foes that moves me. Her testimony is the very crowning-point of our plan. When thou hast made thyself master in Nalapur, and goest forth to meet the armies of the Empress with the head of the Amir Sahib as a peace-offering, there will yet be voices raised against thee. But when it is known that thou didst save the doctor lady, the wife and daughter of thine own and thy father's enemies, and place her in safety in thine own zenana, who shall judge thee too hardly that thou couldst not save the town? Thou hast done all in thy power, and the memsahib will bear witness to thee. And as for sparing her—why, there is Nāth Sahib's sister left for thee still."

"Aha!" laughed Bahram Khan, "and she is not of Sinjāj Kīlin's blood. She will not fight like the doctor lady."

"Nay, but she is of Nāth Sahib's blood," said Jehanara, conscious once more of an inconsistent thrill of perverted pride in her father's race, as she remembered what other Englishwomen had done before in like circumstances; "but all will be well, Highness, whatever happens. If she is found married to thee, she cannot, as a *pardah* woman, be brought into court to testify against thee, and if she is dead by that time, why, she killed herself in her terror, not waiting to learn thy merciful intentions towards her. And women pass, but the throne lasts, Highness. The one is better than the other."

“ Truly, thou art a veritable Shaitan ! ” To Bahram Khan’s mind the epithet conveyed a high compliment. “ Set the matter in train, then. Here is my seal.” He took off his heavy signet and handed it to her. “ Do thou and Narayan Singh see that all is in order, so that not one of my enemies may escape. But what of Barkaraf Sahib ? If he leaves the border, I lose half my vengeance.”

“ It may be, Highness ”—the speaker was Narayan Singh, who had remained silent in sheer astonishment at the daring and resourcefulness of his co-plotter—“ that the Hasrat Ali Begum might help us in the matter. If her Highness were to hear that any evil threatened the doctor lady or her husband, she would doubtless send a messenger to warn her. Might she not become aware, through some indiscretion ” (he looked across at Jehanara), “ that the Kumpsioner Sahib was departing from the border to seek his own safety, leaving Nāth Sahib to carry out a dangerous and disagreeable task ? Her Highness would send the Eye-of-the-Begum immediately to inform the doctor lady of what she had heard, and does there live a woman upon earth who, having received such tidings, would not at once fling the Kumpsioner Sahib’s cowardice in his teeth, and taunt him until he was forced for very shame to remain and do his business for himself ? ”

“ By that saying,” interrupted Jehanara, vexed at being selected to perpetrate an indiscretion, “ thou betrayest thine ignorance, Narayan Singh. There is such a woman, and the doctor lady is she. She would tell the news to her husband, and leave him to reproach the Kumpsioner Sahib if he thought fit,

and there would be no taunts, for the English are not wont to speak like the bazaar folk. But there is another woman who would work for us, though ignorantly, and that is the wife of the Padri Sahib."

"The lady of the angry tongue!" cried Bahram Khan. "But how should we persuade my mother to send a slave to her?"

"It would not be easy, Highness, and therefore the Begum shall not be troubled in the matter. I will disguise myself and tell the Padri's Mem that her Highness, desiring to warn the doctor lady, was too closely watched to allow of her sending her usual messenger. I will say also that I succeeded in slipping away from Dera Gul, and in crossing the desert with the message, but that I dared not approach Nāth Sahib's house, fearing there might be spies among his servants. Thus, then, I will tell the news, and before very long the Padri's Mem will tell it also—in the ears of the Kumpsioner Sahib."

"It is well thought of," said Bahram Khan approvingly.

CHAPTER XII.

HONOUR AND DUTY.

THREE or four days later Mrs Hardy marched up the steps of the Norths' bungalow with a purposeful mien, and requested an interview with the Commissioner. Mr Burgrave had finished his morning's work early, and his couch had been placed in the drawing-room verandah. A table was close beside him, with a volume of Browning lying upon it, and there was a chair close at hand ready for Mabel, but she was out riding with Fitz, to whom Dick, in utter oblivion of the probable awkwardness of the situation, had hastily turned her over on finding that he himself was needed elsewhere. The Commissioner groaned impatiently when Mrs Hardy was announced. A talk with her was not the pleasure he had in view when he hurried through his work, but he consoled himself with the thought that she would not stay long. No doubt the Padri was anxious to get a new harmonium, or to enlarge the church, and they wanted him to head the subscription-list.

“Excuse my getting up,” he said, as he shook hands with her. “My sapient boy has put my crutch just out of reach.”

If the words were intended to convey a hint, Mrs Hardy did not choose to take it, for she sat down deliberately between the crutch and its owner. Then, without any attempt at leading up to the subject, she said, with great distinctness—

“ I have come to talk to you about your policy, Mr Burgrave.”

The Commissioner stared at her in undisguised astonishment. “ Pardon me ; but that is a subject I do not discuss with—with outsiders,” he said.

“ I only want to lay a few facts before you,” pursued Mrs Hardy unmoved.

“ No, no ; excuse me. I cannot consent to discuss affairs of state with a lady.”

“ I mean you to listen to what I have to say, Mr Burgrave, and I shall stay here until you do.”

“ I can't run away,” said Mr Burgrave, with the best smile he could muster, and a side glance at the crutch ; “ and when a lady is kind enough to come and talk to me, it would be rude to stop my ears. Perhaps you will be so good as to let me know your views at once, then, that your valuable time may not be wasted ? ”

“ I should like to ask you, first of all, whether you are aware that your confidential report to the Government on the frontier question is common property at Dera Gul ? Of course, if you choose to tell your secrets to Bahram Khan and leave Major North in ignorance of them, I have nothing more to say.”

To her great joy, Mrs Hardy perceived that she had made an impression. The Commissioner looked startled and disturbed. “ Impossible ! ” he said.

“The report has been seen by no one but my secretary, and the clerks who copied portions of it.”

“It is for you to find out which is to blame. I can only tell you what is going on, just as it has been told to me. I was in my garden about an hour ago, when a woman peeped out from behind the bushes—a miserable, footsore creature. She told me she was a slave of the Hasrat Ali Begum’s—Bahram Khan’s mother—who had sent her to warn the Norths that you intend to withdraw the Nalapur subsidy, and leave Major North to face the result. I have no idea how Bahram Khan obtained the information, but he means to take advantage of it. Though she could not tell me what his plan is exactly, she seemed quite sure that it would end in a general rising, involving almost certain death to the Europeans in places like this. It was clear that she regarded you as a coward, running away from the consequences of your own acts, and deliberately exposing others to danger. That is not my opinion, I may say”—Mrs Hardy had seen the Commissioner wince—“but I thought you could not have looked at things in this light, and as soon as the poor creature was gone I came to you at once.”

“Confiding in Mrs North by the way, no doubt?”

“No, I came straight to you. Now let me ask you, have you realised what will be the result of your action? You know that Major North will resign rather than countenance what we all feel would be a gross breach of faith, and yet you place him in a position in which he must do one thing or the other.

I don't know what Miss North will think about it, but I know what I——”

“ We will leave Miss North's name out of the conversation, if you please.”

“ Excuse me; we can't. How do you expect her to feel towards you when you have set yourself deliberately to ruin her brother? You think worse of her than I do if you believe she will marry you after such a piece of cruel, unprovoked oppression.”

“ Mrs Hardy, a lady is privileged——”

“ Yes, I have no doubt you think I am taking an outrageous liberty, but I can't and won't be silent. All your interest in the frontier centres in a pretty, flighty girl who has no business to be here at all, and simply for the sake of showing your power you come and ride roughshod over us, whose lives are bound up in it. I know you're a proud man, Mr Burgrave, and I don't ask you to reverse your policy publicly, which you would naturally find a hard thing to do. But if this dreadful business has gone too far to be stopped, make Major North take a month's leave, and carry it through yourself. Then the people will see that he is not responsible for the breach of faith, and he will come back and be your right hand when you most need him. What good could a stranger do when the tribes are out? Absolute ignorance of the country is not always the qualification it was in your case, you know. I know the frontier better than any other place in the world—we used to itinerate in the district for years before we were allowed to settle down—and I am *certain* there's trouble coming. I can see it in the looks of the people, and hear it in the way they talk. And here on the spot are the

Norths, the very people to deal with a crisis, and you have done your best to undermine their influence already. Can't you stop there? What have they done that you should persecute them like this?"

"I assure you," said Mr Burchgrave slowly, "that I have the highest possible respect for both Major and Mrs North personally, but personality is not policy."

"Up here it very often is. But come, Mr. Burchgrave, if you don't absolutely hate the Norths, why not do as I suggest?"

"I promise you that every suggestion you have made shall receive the fullest consideration," replied the Commissioner, in his best Secretarial manner. "I may rely upon your silence as to the matter?"

Mrs Hardy thought she detected a relenting in his tone. "Of course you may, if you are really going to do something. I am glad to find you open to conviction, if only for Miss North's sake and your own. You will have a very pretty wife, and I trust a happy one. Ah, there she is!" as the sound of horses' feet was heard, and Mabel, cantering past, waved her whip gaily to the watchers—"and riding with Mr Anstruther!"

"And is there any reason why she should not ride with Mr Anstruther?"

"His peace of mind, that's all. But perhaps you think he deserves no mercy? I may tell you I was glad to hear of your engagement, since it saved that fine young fellow for a more suitable woman."

"A more fortunate woman, doubtless," corrected Mr Burchgrave, with majestic forbearance. "A better there cannot be."

Mabel was in the highest spirits as she mounted the steps after Fitz had ridden away. When he had appeared with the message that Dick was detained at the office, and had sent him to ride with her, her first impulse was to refuse to go, but other counsels prevailed. Fitz had offered no congratulations on her engagement, and the omission rankled in her mind. She was nourishing a reckless determination to provoke a scene by asking him what he meant by it, but her courage oozed away very soon after starting. She would still have given much to know what he thought of the whole situation, but she durst not venture upon an inquiry. Fitz, on his part, made no allusion to the important event which had occurred since their last ride, speaking of the Commissioner as coolly as if she had no particular interest in him. Before they had been out long, she was content to accept his ruling, and conscious of a kind of horror in looking back upon the resolution with which she had started. She was on good terms with herself once more, and to such an extent did the gloom cast by Mr Burgrave's impressive personality seem to be lightened at this distance, that she returned home feeling positively friendly towards him. It was unfortunate that Mrs Hardy's disapproving glance, when she encountered her on the steps, should clash with this new mood of cheerfulness, and that another shock should be awaiting her when she looked into the drawing-room verandah on her way to take off her habit.

"Little girl," said her lover, holding out his hand to draw her nearer him, "would you mind very much if I said I had rather you didn't take these solitary rides with young Anstruther?"

The angry crimson leaped up into Mabel's forehead.

"You have no right whatever to make such insinuations!" she cried hotly.

"Now, dearest, you mistake me. I make no insinuations—I should not dream of such a thing. All I say is—doesn't it seem more suitable to you, yourself, that until I am able to ride with you again you should not go out except with your brother? You will do me the justice to believe that I am not jealous—I would not insult you by such a feeling—but other people will talk. Yes, I am jealous—for my little girl, not of her. No one must have the chance even of passing a remark upon her."

Mabel stood playing with her whip, her face flushed and her lips pressed closely together. "He would like to make life a prison for me, with himself as gaoler!" she thought, as she bent the lash to meet the handle, making no attempt to listen to Mr Burgrave, who went on to speak of the high position his wife would occupy, of the extreme circumspection necessary in such a station, and of the unfortunate love of scandal characterising the higher circles of Indian female officialdom. He did not actually say that the future Mrs Burgrave must be above suspicion, but this was the general idea underlying his remarks.

"Why, you have broken your whip!" The words reached her ears at last. "Never mind, you shall have the best in Bombay as soon as it can come up here. You see what I mean, little girl, don't you?"

"Oh yes," said Mabel drearily. "You forbid me

ever to ride with any one but you, or to speak to a man under seventy."

"Mabel!" he cried, deeply hurt, "can you really misjudge me so cruelly?"

"It's not that," she said, kneeling down beside him with a sudden burst of frankness. "I know how fond you are of me, and I can't tell you how grateful and ashamed it makes me. But you don't understand things. You want to treat me like a baby, and I have been grown-up a long, long time. Think what I have gone through since I came here, even."

"I know, I know!" he said hoarsely. "Don't speak of it, my dearest! The thought of that evening in the nullah comes upon me sometimes at night, and turns me into an abject coward. I mean to take you away where you will be safe, and have no anxieties."

"Then have you never any anxieties? Because they will be mine."

"No," he said, with something of sternness, "my anxieties shall never touch my wife. I want to shake off my worries when I leave the office, and come home to find you in a perfect house, with everything round you perfectly in keeping, the very embodiment of rest and peace, sitting there in a perfect gown, long and soft and flowing, for me to feast my eyes upon."

He lingered lovingly over the contemplation of this ideal picture, to the details of which Mabel listened with a cold shudder. "My dear Eustace," she said brusquely, to hide her dismay, "please tell me how you think the house and the servants are to be kept perfect, if I do nothing but trail round and strike attitudes in a tea-gown?" She caught his

wounded look, and went on hastily, "And what did you mean by that invidious glance you cast at my habit? I won't have my things sniffed at."

"It's so horribly plain," pleaded the culprit.

"And why not?" demanded Mabel, touched in her tenderest point. "I'm sure it's most workmanlike."

"That's just it. Workmanlike—detestable! Why should a woman want to wear workmanlike clothes? All her things ought to be like that gown you wore at the Gymkhana, looking as if a touch would spoil them."

"I shall remind you of this in future, you absurd man!" laughed Mabel, regaining her cheerfulness as she thought she saw a way of establishing her point; "but please remember, once for all, that I shall choose my clothes myself—and they will be suitable for various occasions, for business as well as pleasure. Your part will only be to admire, and to pay." There was a seriousness in her tone which belied the jesting words. Surely he would understand, he must understand, that there was a principle at stake.

"And that part will be punctually performed," said Mr Burgrave indulgently, gazing in admiration into her animated face. "I know that you will remember my foolish prejudices, and gratify them to the utmost extent of my desires, if not of my purse. That is all I ask of you—to be always beautiful."

In her bitter disappointment Mabel could have burst into tears.

"Oh, you won't understand! you won't understand!" she cried. "I don't want piles of clothes;

I don't want everything softened and shaded down for me. I want to be a helpmeet to my husband, as Georgia is to Dick."

"Dear child, I am sorry you have returned to this subject," said Mr Burgrave, taken aback. "I thought we had threshed it out fully long ago."

"Ah, but we can speak more freely now!" she cried. "Don't you see that I should hate to be stuck up on a pedestal for you to look at, or to be a kind of pet, that you might amuse yourself smilingly with my foolish little interests out of office hours? I want you to tell me things, and let us talk them over together, as Dick and Georgia do."

"I know they do," said Mr Burgrave, trying to smile. "The walls here are so thin that I hear them at it every evening. A prolonged growl is your brother soliloquising, and a brief interlude of higher tones is Mrs North giving her opinion of affairs. It is a little embarrassing for me, knowing as I do that my doings are almost certainly the subject of the conversation."

"Well, and if they are?" cried Mabel. "It is only because you and Dick don't understand one another that he and Georgia criticise you. Now think about this very matter of the frontier. If you would only talk to me, and tell me what you thought was the proper thing to be done, I could talk to them, and you might find out that your views were not so much opposed after all. Do try, please; oh, do! I would give anything to bring you to an agreement."

Mr Burgrave's brow was clouded as he looked into her eager eyes.

"Am I to understand," he said, with dreadful dis-

tinctness, "that your brother and Mrs North are trying to make use of you to extract information from me? No, I will not suspect your brother. No man would stoop to employ such an expedient—so degrading to my future wife, so affronting to myself. It is Mrs North's doing."

Mabel, who had listened in horrified silence, sprang to her feet at this point as if stung. "I think it will be as well for me to return you this," she said, laying upon the table the ring of "finest Europe make," which the Commissioner had been fain to purchase from the chief jeweller in the bazaar as a makeshift until the diamond hoop for which he had sent to Bombay could arrive. "You have grossly insulted both Georgia and me, and—I never wish to speak to you again."

She meant to sweep impressively from the room, but the angry tears that filled her eyes made her blunder against the table, and Mr Burgrave, raising himself with a wild effort, caught her hand. "Mabel, come here," he said, and furious with herself for yielding, she obeyed. "Give me that ring, please." He restored it solemnly to its place on her finger. "Now we are on speaking terms again. Dear little girl, forgive me. I was wrong, unpardonably wrong, but I never thought your generous little heart would lead you so far in opposing my expressed wish. I admire the impulse, my darling, but when you come to know me better you will understand how unlikely it is that I should yield to it. Come, dear, look sunny again, or must I make a heroic attempt to go down on my knees with one leg in splints?"

"Oh, if you would only understand!" sighed

Mabel. She was kneeling beside him again, occupying quite undeservedly, as she felt, the position of suppliant. "If only I could make you see——"

"See what?" he asked, taking her face in his hands and kissing it. "I see that my little girl thinks me an old brute. Won't she believe me if I assure her on my honour that I am trying to do the best I can for her brother, and that I hope I have found a way of putting things right?"

"Have you, really?" Her bright smile was a sufficient reward. "Oh, Eustace, if it's all settled happily, I shall love you for ever!"

The assurance did not seem to promise much that was new when the relative position of those concerned was considered, but the unsolicited kiss bestowed upon him was very grateful to Mr Burgrave, and he smiled kindly as he released Mabel and bade her run away and change her habit. She left the room gaily enough, but once outside, a sudden wave of recollection swept over her, and she wrung her hands wildly.

"I was free—*free!*" she cried to herself. "Just for a moment I was free, and I let him fetch me back. Oh, what can I do? I believe I could be quite fond of him if he would let me, but he won't. And if he wasn't so good I should delight to break it off in the most insulting way possible, but his virtues are the worst thing about him. I hate them! Is this sort of thing to go on for a whole lifetime—beating against a stone wall and bruising my hands, and then being kissed and given a sweet, and told not to cry? Mabel Louisa North, you are a silly fool, and you deserve just what you have got. I hate and despise

you, and with my latest breath I shall say, Serve you right ! ”

“ Oh, Dick, has it come ? ” Georgia sprang up to meet her husband, as he entered the room with a gloomy face.

“ No, but so far as I can see, it’s close at hand. I can’t quite make things out, but Burgrave seems to have altered his plans astonishingly. Instead of travelling down to the coast at once, he is going to stay here another week, and hold a durbar at Nalapur. I have to send word to Beltring at once to get the big *shamiana* put up in the Agency grounds, and to see that all the Sardars have notice. What does it mean ? ”

“ He’s going to see the thing through on his own account,” said Georgia, with conviction. “ But it will make no difference to us, will it, Dick ? ”

“ Rather not ! The breach of faith is the same, whether I announce it at first, or merely come in afterwards to carry it out. I wish Burgrave hadn’t such a mania for mysteries. Ismail Bakhsh tells me he has been sending off official telegrams at a tremendous rate all day, and yet when I ventured to hint that some idea of the proposed proceedings at the durbar would be interesting, he turned rusty at once, and said he had not received his instructions. This system of government by thunderbolt doesn’t suit me. It’s enough to make a man chuck things up now, without waiting for the final blow.”

“ Oh, but you will stick on as long as you can ? It’s some sort of security for peace.”

“ A wretchedly shaky one, then,” said Dick, with

an angry laugh. "Here's the Amir sending his mullah Aziz-ud-Din to say that he learns on incontestable authority that the subsidy is to be withdrawn, and imploring me to say whether I have any hand in it. The poor old fellow's faith in me is quite touching, but what could I say except that I knew nothing about it, and repeat the assurance I gave him before?"

"But what could Ashraf Ali mean by incontestable authority?"

"How can I tell? Some spy, I suppose. By the way, though, it didn't strike me. That must be what the Commissioner meant!"

"Why, what did he say?"

"He doesn't intend to stay on in this house. Now that he can be got into a cart, he thinks it better to return to his hired bungalow. I imagine I looked a bit waxy, for he graciously explained that he had reason to believe we have spies among the servants here."

"Dick! you don't mean to say that he accused you——?"

"No, he was so good as to assure me that he had the best possible means of knowing I had nothing to do with it. But when I reminded him that all the servants, except those Mab brought with her from Bombay, have been with us for years, he intimated that he made no accusations, but official matters had got out, and he didn't mean to allow that sort of thing to go on. No doubt it was that sweetseller fellow, as we thought."

"Well, I think that to go is the best thing the Commissioner can do. It will give Mab a little peace."

"Yes, I shouldn't say she looked exactly festive."

"How could she? She feels that she has cut herself off from us, for of course we can't discuss things before her as we used to do, and I don't think she finds that he makes up for it. I have great hopes."

"Now, no coming between them!" said Dick warningly, and Georgia laughed.

"I trust it won't be necessary," she said.

A week later she happened to be again sitting alone in the drawing-room busy with the fine white work on which she expended so many hours and such loving care at this time, when Dick came in. To her astonishment, he was in uniform, and laid his sword upon the table by the door as he entered.

"Why, Dick, you are not going to Nalapur with the Commissioner after all?" she cried.

"Burgrave can't go, and I have to hold the durbar instead."

"But how—what——?"

"It seems that he had a fearful blow-up with Tighe this morning, after taking it for granted all along that he would be allowed to leave off his splints and go. Tighe absolutely howled at the idea, told him that in moving from this house to his own he had jarred the knee so badly as to throw himself back for a week, and that the splints must stay on for some time yet. Of course he can't ride in them, and to take him through the mountains in a doolie would be madness."

"I wondered at his being allowed to ride so soon," said Georgia, "but I thought Dr Tighe must have found him better than we expected. Of course I

haven't seen the knee for some time lately. But did he tell you what the object of the durbar was?"

"He did. It is just what we thought it would be, Georgie."

"Nonsense!" cried Georgia sharply. "As if you would go to Nalapur in that case! Are you joking, Dick?"

His set face brought conviction slowly to her mind.

"You are not joking, and yet you came home, and got ready, just as if you meant to hold the durbar, and never told me!" she cried.

"I do mean to hold the durbar," said Dick.

She sat stunned, and he went on, "I thought I wouldn't tell you till the last moment, because I knew how you would feel about it, and I didn't want to worry you more than could be helped."

"To worry me!" she repeated. "And yet you come here and try to tease me with this absurd, impossible story? You are not going."

Dick looked her straight in the face. "But I am," he said.

"But you said you would resign first."

"I must resign afterwards, that's all. There are some things a man can't do, Georgie, and one is to desert in the face of the enemy."

"But it's wrong—dishonourable!"

"It's got to be done, and Burgrave has managed to engineer matters so that I have to do it. I talked about resigning, and he said very huffily that he wasn't the person to receive my resignation, which is quite true. He anticipates danger, I can see, for he tells me he has had information that

Bahram Khan has some sort of plot on hand, and do you expect me to hang back after that ? ”

“ I never thought you would care what people said. If it's right to resign, do it, and let them say what they like.”

“ If I wasn't a soldier I would, but I have no choice.”

“ No choice between right and wrong ? ”

“ Not as a soldier. It isn't my business to criticise my orders, but to execute them. Oh, I know all you are thinking. I see it perfectly well, and from your point of view you are absolutely in the right, and as an individual I agree with you, but I am not my own master.”

“ And your personal honour ? ”

“ I'm afraid it has got to look after itself. Don't think me a brute, Georgie. I want to be on your side, but I can't.”

“ Then I suppose it's no use my saying anything more ? ”

“ I really think it would be better not. You see, it would only make us both awfully uncomfortable, and do no good.”

“ Oh, don't ! ” burst from Georgia. “ I can't bear to hear you talk like that. Remember your promise to Ashraf Ali. The poor old man has relied on that, and pledged himself to all the Sardars that the Government doesn't intend to forsake them. The whole honour of England is at stake. Dick, these people have learnt from you and my father to believe the word of an Englishman, and are you going to teach them to distrust it now ? ”

“ When you have quite finished——” began Dick.

“ I can’t! I can’t! Oh, Dick, our own people, who know us and trust us! Have you the heart to forsake them? Dick, won’t you listen to me? I have never urged you to do anything against your will before, but when it is a matter of right and conscience—! I know you believe you’re right now, but how will you feel about it afterwards? Think of our friends betrayed, our name disgraced, through you!”

“ Hang it, Georgie!” cried Dick, losing his temper, “ you make a man feel such a cur. I tell you I have got to go.”

“ I wish I had died when baby died at Iskandarbagh, rather than lived to hear you say that.”

Dick turned away without answering, and took up his sword from the table where he had laid it down. It was always Georgia’s privilege to buckle the sword-belt for him, and she rose mechanically, rousing herself with an effort from her stupor of dismay. He took the strap roughly out of her hands.

“ No,” he said, “ you’d better have nothing to do with it. The blame is all mine at present, and you can keep your own conscience clear.”

She sank upon a chair again and watched him miserably as he buckled on the sword and went out. On the threshold he looked back, softening a little.

“ Graham has changed his mind, and is not coming to the durbar. If there should be any attempt at a rising, you are to take refuge in the old fort. Tighe will come and sleep in the house these two nights if you are nervous.”

“ I’m not nervous,” said Georgia indignantly.

“ Oh, very well. After all, we shall be between you and Nalapur.”

He crossed the hall to the front door, Georgia's strained nerves quivering afresh as his spurs clinked at each step. Suddenly she realised that he was gone, and without bidding her farewell.

“ Dick ! ” she cried faintly, “ you are not going—like this ? ”

There was no answer, and she moved slowly to the window, supporting herself by the furniture. He was already mounted, and was giving his final directions to Ismail Bakhsh. The sight gave Georgia fresh strength, and stepping out on the verandah, she ran round the corner of the house. There was one place where he always turned and looked back as he rode out. He could not pass it unheeded even now, that spot, close to the gate of the compound, where she had so often waited for his return. As she stood grasping the verandah rail with both hands, the consciousness that for the first time in their married life he was leaving her in anger swept over her like a flood.

“ Oh, it will kill me ! ” she moaned, seizing one of the pillars to support herself, but almost immediately another thought flashed into her mind. “ No, he is not angry—my dear old Dick ! he is only grieved. He durst not be kind to me, lest I should persuade him any more, and he should have to give way. God keep you, my darling ! ”

In the rush of happy tears that filled her eyes, the landscape was blotted out, and when she could see distinctly again, Dick had passed the gate. She could just distinguish the top of his helmet

above the wall as he rode. He had gone by while she was not looking. Would it have been any comfort to her to know that he had looked back, and not seeing her, had ridden on faster ?

“ I had to behave like a brute, or I should have given in—and she didn’t see it,” he said to himself remorsefully. “ Of course she was right, bless her ! She always is, but I couldn’t do anything else.”

Her pale reproachful face haunted him, and had there been time he would have turned back, but he was obliged to hurry on. As he entered the town, he came upon Dr Tighe.

“ Doctor,” he said, laying a hand on the little man’s shoulder, “ look after my wife while I’m away. She’s awfully cut up at my going like this.”

“ All right ! ” said the doctor cheerfully ; “ and don’t you be frightened about her. Mrs North is a sensible woman, and knows better than to go and make herself ill with fretting.”

“ The memsahib parted from the sahib without kissing him ! ” said one of the servants wonderingly to the rest.

“ What foolish talk is this ? ” asked Mabel’s bearer scornfully. “ My last memsahib never kissed the sahib unless he had gained her favour by a gift of jewels.”

The tone implied that the subject might be dismissed as beneath contempt, but the man’s actions did not altogether tally with it, for after loftily waving aside the assurance of the first speaker that this sahib and memsahib were not as others, he retired precipitately to his own quarters. Here a lanky

youth, who was slumbering peacefully in the midst of a miscellaneous collection of goods, some of them Mabel's, and others the bearer's own, was suddenly roused by a kick.

“Hasten to Dera Gul with a message of good omen!” said the bearer, impelling his messenger firmly in the desired direction. “Nāth Sahib and the doctor lady have quarrelled, and until they meet again he is without the protection of her magic.”

CHAPTER XIII.

ONE NIGHT.

“ AWAKE, Miss Sahib, awake ! ”

“ Miss North ! Miss North ! ”

Mabel sat up in bed. Her window was being shaken violently, and outside on the verandah were those two persistent voices.

“ See what it is, Tara,” she called to her ayah, but the woman was crouching in a corner, her teeth chattering with terror. Seeing that she was too frightened to move, Mabel threw on a dressing-gown and went to the window. Outside stood Fitz Anstruther, his face pale in the moonlight, and Ismail Bakhsh, who was armed with his old regimental carbine and tulwar. Thus accoutred, he was wont to mount guard over the house and its inmates when Dick was absent, patrolling the verandahs at intervals ; but he had never hitherto found it necessary to alarm his charges at midnight.

“ What is it ? ” asked Mabel, opening the window.

“ You must get dressed at once, and bring anything that you particularly value,” said Fitz hurriedly. “ We were attacked on the way to Nalapur, and there was no durbar. I’m come instead of the Major to fetch you to the old fort, for Bahram Khan

and his cut-throats may be here at any moment. Will you speak to Mrs North, please? I was afraid of startling her if I knocked at her window or came into the house. Winlock is outside with twenty sowars, and he and I will see after the papers in the Major's study."

Mabel dropped the blind and went towards Georgia's room, twisting up her hair mechanically as she did so. Rahah was already on the alert, and met her at the door with gleaming eyes.

"I know, Miss Sahib. The evil is at hand at last. Awake, O my lady!" She laid a hand gently on Georgia's forehead. "The time has come to take refuge in the fort. The Sahib bade me be prepared."

"Dick has sent Mr Anstruther to fetch us, Georgie," said Mabel, unconsciously altering Fitz's words, as Georgia, half-awake, looked sleepily from her to Rahah. "I think he wants us to be quick."

"Of course," said Georgia, rousing herself. "Now, Rahah, you will be happy at last. We'll come and help you, Mab, before Tara's ready. Oh, but the papers!—I must see that they are safe."

"Mr Anstruther is looking after them," said Mabel.

"I wonder whether Dick thought of giving him the key of the safe? Very likely he forgot it in his hurry. He had better have my duplicate. Oh, thanks, Mab! There's a tin despatch-box standing by the safe which will hold all the most important papers."

With the key in her hand, Mabel hurried down the passage, her slippers making no sound on the

matting. There was a light in Dick's den, and Fitz and Captain Winlock were shovelling armfuls of papers and various small articles into a huge camel-trunk which stood open in the middle of the floor. As Mabel reached the door, Winlock held out something to Fitz. "Not much good taking this, at any rate," he said, and a cold hand seemed to grip Mabel's heart as she saw that it was Dick's tobacco-pouch, which Georgia, with what his sister considered a reprehensible toleration of her husband's pleasant vices, had worked for him.

"No, put it in," said Fitz gruffly. "It may comfort her to have it."

A slight sound at the door, half gasp, half groan, made both men jump, and looking round they saw Mabel, her eyes wide with terror.

"Mr Anstruther, what has happened to Dick?"

The words were barely audible. Fitz stood guiltily silent.

"Tell me," she said.

"He was wounded," growled Winlock.

"It's worse than that, I know. Is he taken prisoner?"

"No," was the unwilling reply.

"Then he's killed! Oh!——" but before Mabel could utter another word, Fitz's hand was upon her mouth.

"Miss North, you mustn't scream. For Heaven's sake, think of his wife! Remember what those two are—have been to one another, and remember—everything. Let us get her safe to the fort, and let Mrs Hardy break it to her gently. A sudden shock like this might kill her."

Mabel freed herself from the restraining hand, and stood shivering as if with cold. "Oh, Dick, Dick!" she wailed pitifully, in a tone that went to the men's hearts, and then she crept back in silence along the passage. Once in her own room, she dropped helplessly into a chair and sat rigid, staring straight before her. Dick dead! Georgia a widow! that perfect comradeship at an end for ever!—and Georgia did not know it. Mabel wrung her hands feebly. It was the only movement she had strength to make. All power of thought and action seemed to have forsaken her. Dick was dead and Georgia was left.

"My beloved Mab!" Georgia came hurrying in, equipped for driving. "I said I should be ready first, but I didn't expect to find you quite so far behind. I believe Rahah keeps half my things packed, all ready for a night alarm of this kind, but of course your ayah is not accustomed to these little excitements. Are you quite overwhelmed by the amount that has to be done?"

"Yes; I don't know what to pack first," said Mabel, with a forced laugh, keeping her face turned away.

"Well, Rahah and I will see to that while you dress. We may be some days in the fort, and you don't want to go about in an amber dressing-gown the whole time. We'll begin with your jewel-case. Where is it?"

"Oh, I don't know! What's the good of taking that sort of thing?"

"It might be invaluable—to buy food, or bribe the enemy, or ransom a prisoner—or anything.

Where *is* it, Mab? I thought you kept it in here?"

"Yes, I do." Mabel looked up from the shoe she was tying, as Georgia ransacked a drawer in vain. "But no doubt Tara has taken it out to the cart already. She has always been instructed to save it first of all if the house was on fire."

Mabel spoke wearily. The awful irony of Georgia's fussing over a box of trinkets while Dick lay dead almost broke down her self-control. How was it that she did not guess the truth without being told?

"But why hasn't she come back to help you to dress? I hope it's all right, Mab, but I doubt if you'll see that jewel-case again. She has had time to slip away with it and hide somewhere. Here, Rahah, put all these things in the box. It's well to take plenty of clothes, Mab, for we are not likely to be able to get much washing done."

"Don't!" burst from Mabel.

"Why not?" asked Georgia, in astonishment.

"Why, it sounds as if you thought we were going to spend the rest of our lives in the fort," said Mabel lamely.

"I don't see why. Surely you would like to save as many of your things as possible, whether we stay there long or not?"

"Oh yes, of course." Mabel turned away to fasten her dress at the glass, conscious that in Georgia's eyes she must be playing a sorry part. Georgia thought her dazed with fright, whereas her mind was full of that dreadful revelation which must be made sooner or later.

"Are you nearly ready, Mrs North?" asked Fitz's voice in the passage.

"Quite," replied Georgia, stuffing Mabel's dressing-gown ruthlessly into a full trunk. "Tell the servants to come and fetch the boxes, please."

"Well, I'm afraid the servants have stampeded to a certain extent. Ismail Bakhsh and the rest of the *chaprasis* and one or two others are left, and that's all, but of course they'll make themselves useful."

"You see, Mab!" said Georgia, and Mabel understood that she need not expect to see her jewel-case again. They followed Fitz out into the verandah, in front of which were ranged all the vehicles belonging to the establishment, drawn by everything that could be found even remotely resembling a horse.

"I told Ismail Bakhsh to get them out," said Fitz. "There are the wives and children to bring, and I knew you wouldn't mind."

"Of course not," said Georgia. "Wait a moment, please; I have forgotten something," and she ran back into the drawing-room. Mabel knew what it was she had suddenly remembered.

"I hope she won't be long," said Fitz anxiously. "We've been here a quarter of an hour already."

Only a quarter of an hour! To Mabel it seemed hours since she had been awakened by those voices on the verandah. She looked out beyond the line of troopers sitting motionless on their horses, and noticed, without perceiving the significance of the fact, that there were two or three of their number acting as scouts further off in the moonlight.

“I daren’t lose any more time,” Fitz went on, fidgeting up and down the steps. “I can’t think how it is they have left us so long.”

Ismail Bakhsh, stowing Mabel’s dressing-bag under the seat of the dogcart, looked round. “Sahib, *he* rides to-night. They will not cross the border until he has passed.”

“Then whoever or whatever *he* may be, he has probably saved all our lives,” said Fitz, as Georgia came out of the house. While he was helping her into the dogcart, Mabel caught once more the sound of the tramp of the galloping horse, which the old trooper’s quick ear had perceived some minutes before. The sowars straightened themselves suddenly in their saddles, and the horses pricked their ears in the direction of the noise.

“Old boy seems somewhat agitated to-night,” muttered Winlock to Fitz, as the invisible rider pulled up abruptly, then galloped on again.

“There’s enough to make him so,” returned Fitz, who was helping to hoist the last terrified native woman, with her burden of two children and several brass pots, into the last cart. “All right now?” he demanded, looking down the row of vehicles. “We had better be off, then.”

Was it fancy, or did Mabel see the sparks struck from the stone on which the unseen horse stumbled as the sound came nearer? She could have screamed for sheer terror; but Rahah, who was her companion on the back seat of the dogcart, laughed aloud as she wrapped the end of her *chadar* round the great white Persian cat she held in her arms.

“What is there to fear, Miss Sahib? No man has

ever stood against Sinjāi Kīlin, and he is close at hand. The rule of the Sārkar will continue."

"Now do tell me what has happened," Mabel heard Georgia saying to Fitz, as he drove out of the gate. "I'm sure I am a model soldier's wife, for Dick suddenly sends me a bare message ordering me to abandon all my household goods and take refuge in the fort, and I do it without asking why! But I must confess I should like to know the reason. Did the durbar break up in disorder, or were you attacked on the way back?"

"There was no durbar at all. The attack came off on the way there. But I say, Mrs. North," said Fitz desperately, anticipating Georgia's question, "I can't tell you what happened then, for I wasn't there. Won't it do if I recount my own experiences, and you ask the other fellows about the rest of it when we get to the fort?" He left her no time to answer, but went on hurriedly:—

"Yesterday we got as far as the entrance to the Akrab Pass, some way beyond Dera Gul, and camped there for the night. The Major chose the site of the camp himself, in an awfully good position commanding the mouth of the pass, and arranged everything just as if it was war-time. I knew, of course, that he was looking out for treachery of some sort, and I was awfully sick when he told me this morning that I was to stay and do camp-guard with Winlock and not go with him to the durbar. I yearned horribly to disobey orders, but, you see, he left me certain things to do if—if anything went wrong." Fitz cleared his throat, muttered that he thought he must have got a cold, and hastened on. "Beltring had come down

from Nalapur to meet the Commissioner, as he thought, and the Sardar Abd-ul-Nabi was waiting just inside the pass with an escort of the Amir's troops. We in camp had nothing to do but kick our heels all day, for the Major left strict orders against going out of sight of the pass. He meant to get through his work by daylight, so as to sleep at the camp to-night, and come back here in the morning, you see. There were no caravans passing, and the place seemed deserted, which we thought a bad sign. But about eleven this morning one of our scouts brought in a small boy, who had come tearing down the pass and asked for the English camp. We had the little chap up before us, and I recognised him as a slave-boy I saw at Dera Gul the day Miss North and I were there. He knew me at once, and began to pour out what he had to say so fast that we could scarcely follow him. It seems that the Hasrat Ali Begum had managed in some way to get an inkling of Bahram Khan's plot, and she despatched one of her confidential old ladies to warn you and the Major. Unfortunately, the old lady got caught, and Bahram Khan was so enraged with his mother that he promptly packed his whole zenana off to Nalapur, to be out of mischief, I suppose. On the way through the pass this boy, by the Begum's orders, managed to hide among the rocks when they broke camp, and so escaped with her message. He hoped to catch the Major before he started, but, most unhappily, he durst not ask the only man he met whether he had passed, and he was behind him instead of in front. So he came down the pass, missing him entirely, of course, and warned us instead. The Major's force was to be attacked in the

worst part of the defile, he told us, and as soon as a messenger could reach Dera Gul to say that the attack had taken place, Bahram Khan would set out to raid Alibad. It was an awful dilemma for Winlock and me. It was no use sending after the Major to warn him, for whatever was to happen must have happened by that time, and if we tried to warn the town, Bahram Khan was safe to intercept the messenger and start on his raid at once, and of course we couldn't evacuate the camp without orders. We decided to strike the tents and get everything ready for a start at any moment, and we posted our best shots on either side of the entrance to the pass, in case the Major's party should be pursued. Then we waited, and at last the—the force turned up. Thanks to the Major's suspicions and precautions, the surprise was a good deal of a fizzle. But as I said, I can't tell you about that. Well, we had to get back here. The enemy were supposed not to be far behind, so we left Beltring and twenty-five men to hold the mouth of the pass at all hazards, and see that no messenger got through until we were safely past Dera Gul. After that it was left to them to seize the moment for retreating on Shah Nawaz, which Haycraft was to evacuate, so that both detachments might return here by the line of the canal. We put our wounded and baggage in the middle, and started——”

“No, wait!” cried Georgia, for hitherto Fitz had spoken so fast that she had found it impossible to get in a word. “Who were the wounded? You said nothing about them before. Was any one killed?”

“I—I really can't give you any particulars,”

returned Fitz, at his wits' end. "Please let me finish my tale. I'm getting to the most exciting part. It was fearfully thrilling when we had to pass under the very walls of Dera Gul. Of course we were all ready for action at a moment's notice, but the men were told to ride at ease, and talk if they liked, to give the impression that all was well. I know Winlock and I exchanged the most appalling inanities at the top of our voices, till the Dera Gul people must have thought we were drunk. As we expected, pretty soon there came a hail from the walls, asking who we were, and Ressaldar Badullah Khan, who was nearest, called out that we were coming back from Nalapur without holding the durbar. 'But what has happened?' asked the voice from the wall. 'What should happen save that the Superintendent Sahib won't hold the durbar?' said the Ressaldar, and we went on. Of course they must have been awfully puzzled, for they couldn't see our wounded in the dark, and the only thing they could do was to send some one off to the pass to find out what had happened. Beltring was to look out for that, and if possible to seize the messenger and get his men away at once, before Bahram Khan could come up and take him in the rear."

"And I suppose Dick is helping to prepare the fort for defence?" asked Georgia. "There must be a dreadful amount to do."

"Oh, that reminds me, Miss North," cried Fitz quickly, turning round to Mabel. "The Commissioner was most anxious to come and fetch you himself, but we pointed out to him that he could do no good, and being so lame, might hinder us a good

deal. Excuse me, Mrs North, but I think I must give all my attention to driving just here. I don't know why the whole population should have turned their possessions out into the street, unless it was to make it awkward for us."

They were approaching the fort, and the roadway was almost blocked with carts, cattle, household goods, and terrified people. Several vedettes, to whom Winlock gave the countersign, had been passed at various points, and it was evident that the sudden danger had not taken the military authorities, at any rate, by surprise. The space in front of the fort gates was a blaze of light from many torches, and several officers in uniform were resolutely bringing order out of the general chaos. Gangs of coolies, bearing sand-bags and loads of furniture, fuel, provisions, and forage, seemed inextricably mixed up with shrill-voiced women and crying children, ponies, camels, and goats; and it needed a good deal of shouting and some diplomacy, with not a little physical force, to separate the various streams and set them flowing in the right directions. As the dogcart stopped, Woodworth, the adjutant, came up.

"We want volunteers to help destroy the buildings round the fort," he said. "You'll go, Anstruther? What about your servants, Mrs North?"

"There are seven who have come with us, nearly all old soldiers," said Georgia. "If you will speak to Ismail Bakhsh, who is a host in himself, I will see that their wives and children are safely lodged while they set to work."

"Awfully sorry to trouble you about this sort of thing just now," said Woodworth awkwardly.

“ Trouble ? I am delighted they should help, of course. Where shall I find my husband ? ”

“ Good heavens ! You haven’t heard—— ? ”
The adjutant stopped suddenly.

“ You blighted idiot ! ” muttered Fitz under his breath. “ Fact is, Mrs North, the Major’s hurt—rather badly—” this reluctantly ; “ but I didn’t want to frighten you sooner than I could help—— ”

“ Where is he ? Take me to him at once,” was all she said.

Woodworth stepped forward mechanically to help her out of the cart, but found himself forestalled. The Commissioner had come hurrying up, preceded by two huge Sikhs, who cleared a passage for him through the throng, and now, supporting himself upon his crutch, he held out his hand to Georgia.

“ Believe me, Mrs North,” he said, “ you have the sympathy of every man here at this terrible time. Surely it must be some consolation to you that your noble husband fell fighting, as he would have wished, and that the smallness of our losses is entirely owing to his prudence and self-sacrifice ? ”

Georgia, on the ground now, looked about her like one dazed, finding, wherever she looked, fresh confirmation of the cruel tidings. In Mr Burchgrave’s sympathising face, in Woodworth’s pitying eyes, in the sorrowful glances of the stern troopers who had closed up round the group, she read the truth of what she had just heard. Her hand went quickly from her heart to her eyes, as though to shut out the sight. Then it dropped again.

“ Oh, you might have told me at once ! ” she cried bitterly to Fitz. “ I could have borne it

better from you than from the man who has done it all."

"When you are more yourself, Mrs North, I know you will regret this injustice," said Mr Burgrave, without anger. "Allow me to take you to your quarters in the fort."

Georgia shook from head to foot as he offered her his arm. She was on the point of refusing it, of yielding to the sickening sense of aversion with which his presence inspired her, when the scowling gaze of the mounted troopers arrested her attention, and awakened her to the deadly peril in which the Commissioner stood. These men idolised Dick, and they had heard her accuse Mr Burgrave of causing his death. A word from her would mean that his last moment had come. Even to turn her back upon him would be taken to show that she left him to their vengeance, which might not follow immediately, but would be certain to fall sooner or later. With a great effort she conquered her repugnance, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"At a time like this there are no private quarrels," she said hoarsely, addressing the troopers rather than the Commissioner. "We must all stand together for the honour of England."

"Of course, of course!" agreed Mr Burgrave, wondering what on earth had called forth such a melodramatic remark, for he had missed the growl of disappointed rage with which the troopers let their ready blades fall back into the scabbards. "Most admirable spirit, I'm sure."

"Upon my word!" muttered Woodworth to Fitz, "the man would have been cut to pieces

before our eyes in another moment, and he never saw it."

"Oh, ignorance is bliss," returned Fitz shortly. "What's to happen to the carts?"

"Broken up for firewood, I suppose. We can't make room for everything."

"I fear you will find your quarters somewhat confined," Mr Burgrave was saying kindly to Georgia, as with the help of his Sikhs he piloted her through the gateway, "but we cannot expect palatial accommodation in our present circumstances. Our good friends Mrs Hardy and Miss Graham are taking pains to make things comfortable for you, I know, and you must be kind enough to excuse the deficiencies due to lack of time and means."

Georgia gave a short fierce laugh. The Commissioner's tone suggested that if he had been consulted sooner there would have been a perfect *Hôtel Métropole* in readiness to receive the fugitives. She broke away from him, and laid her hand lovingly upon one of the new gates, for his presentation of which to a presumably ruined fort all the newspapers of the province had made Dick their butt only the week before. The echoes of their Homeric laughter were even at this moment resounding in Bombay on the one hand and Lahore on the other.

"If your life—any of our lives—are saved, it will all be due to him!" she cried, and the Commissioner marvelled at the lack of sequence so characteristic of a woman's mind. He led Georgia through the labyrinth of curiously involved passages and courts at the back of the club-house, in which Government stores and stray pieces of private property were lying

about pell-mell, until they could be separated and reduced to some sort of order by the overworked officer in charge of the housing arrangements. Mabel followed with Rahah, and at last they reached a tiny oblong courtyard not far from the rear wall of the fort. Here, in the middle of the paved space, was Mrs Hardy, sorting a confused heap of her possessions with the assistance of an elderly Christian native, Mr Hardy's bearer.

"Oh, my dear! my poor dear!" she cried, running to Georgia, and for a moment the two women held each other locked in a close embrace.

"This room," said Mr Burgrave, who seemed to feel it incumbent upon him to do the honours of the place, "has been allotted to Miss Graham, as it communicates by a passage with the Colonel's quarters in the next courtyard. The two on the right are Mr and Mrs Hardy's, the two on the left are intended for you, Mrs North, and the one opposite is for you, Mabel. I believe the arrangement was suggested to Colonel Graham by Major North himself."

Mrs Hardy raised her head and gave him a fiery glance. "Miss North, will you be so kind as to request Mr Burgrave to go away?" she said viciously.

"No; wait, please," said Georgia. "Which of the officers were with my husband when he—was hurt, Mr Burgrave?"

"There were several, I believe, but the only one not seriously wounded was Mr Beltring, and he will not come in until the Shah Nawaz contingent gets here—if at all."

"If—when he comes, I should like to see him,

please," said Georgia, and the Commissioner departed.

"Now come in, dear, and lie down," said Mrs Hardy. "Your rooms are ready, and I see Rahah, like a thoughtful girl, has even brought the cat to make it look homelike. Anand Masih will bring you some tea in a minute, and then I hope you will just go to bed again."

"Dear Mrs Hardy, you have given us all your own furniture," protested Georgia, recognising a well-worn writing-table; but Mrs Hardy shook her head vigorously.

"Nonsense, my dear, nonsense! We had far more brought in than we can possibly use in this little place, and as soon as I have seen you settled, Anand Masih and I will look after my two rooms. Mr Hardy is helping Dr Tighe in the reading-room, which they have turned into an hospital, or I know he would have come to see if he could do anything for you."

Never silent for a moment, Mrs Hardy administered tea without milk to Mabel and Georgia, and then tried vainly again to induce them to go to bed. Just as she was departing in despair, Flora Graham ran in.

"I am helping to arrange the hospital—I can't stay," she panted. "Oh, Mrs North, Mabel darling, I am so sorry! I can't tell you how much—" She stopped, unable to speak. "I know a little what it is like," she added, with a sob; "Fred and his men are not in yet."

She dashed away, and Georgia and Mabel sat silent, hand in hand, until the sound of a cheer from the hard-worked garrison heralded the arrival of the

Shah Nawaz detachment. Presently the clink of spurs on the verandah announced young Beltring, who was Dick's most trusted pupil among the military officers desiring political employment, and as a man after his chief's own heart, had been allowed to earn experience, if not fame, as his assistant at Nalapur. He came in slowly and reluctantly, scarcely daring to look at Georgia, his torn and bloodstained clothes and bandaged head bearing eloquent testimony to the fighting he had seen that day.

"Sit down, Mr Beltring," said Georgia, holding out her hand to him. "You got here without further loss, I hope?"

"Yes, the enemy were on both our flanks, but they never came near enough to do any harm," he answered, dropping wearily into a chair.

"Now tell us, please. You were with him—at the end?"

"I was the nearest, but not with him. He was riding with that treacherous scoundrel Abd-ul-Nabi, and we had orders to keep a few paces to the rear. We thought he wanted to speak to Abd-ul-Nabi privately, but now I believe it was because he fore-saw what was coming. The rest of us were still in that part of the pass where the walls are too steep for any ambush, while he, on in front with Abd-ul-Nabi, was rounding the corner where the track goes down suddenly into a wide rocky nullah. He must have seen something that he was not meant to see—the glitter of weapons among the rocks perhaps—for he turned suddenly and shouted, 'Back! back! an ambuscade!' Abd-ul-Nabi spurred his horse across the pathway to prevent his getting back to us,

but the Major came straight at him, and the ruffian pulled out a pistol and fired at him point-blank. I cut the wretch down the next moment, but the Major had dropped like a log, and before we could get him up there was a rush round the corner in front, while Abd-ul-Nabi's escort, who had been riding last, attacked us in the rear. Leyward took command, and the fellows behind were soon disposed of, but in front we had a pretty hard time. At last we drove them back far enough to get at the Major's body. He was lying under a heap of dead. I got him out, and his head fell back on my shoulder. No, there could be no mistake, Mrs North. Do you think I would ever have left him while there was any breath in his body? I tried to get him on to my horse, and Badullah Khan helped me. Just as we had got him up, there was another rush, and the wretched beast broke away. I was thrown off on my head, and when I came to myself the Ressaldar was holding me in front of him on his horse, and we were in full retreat down the pass. We had lost eight killed beside the Major, and Leyward and the two other fellows were all badly wounded, besides almost every one of the men, and—and they wouldn't go back."

"No, no; it would have been wrong," murmured Georgia. "Thank you for telling me this. There could be no message."

"No message," repeated Beltring, answering the unasked question.

"He could not send me any message," wailed Georgia, as the young man went out, "and I parted from him in anger. Oh, Dick, my darling, my darling—forgive me!"

“ Oh, Georgie, don't ! ” sobbed Mabel.

“ Poor Mab ! I forgot you were there. Lie down here on my bed. I can't sleep.”

“ I'm sure I can't,” protested Mabel.

It was not long before she cried herself to sleep, however, but Georgia sat where she was until the morning.

CHAPTER XIV.

TO KEEP THE FLAG FLYING.

“MAB!” Mabel awoke from her uneasy slumbers to wonder where she was, and why Georgia was sitting there, her face silhouetted against the square of grey light that represented a window. “Mab! Dick is not dead.”

“Why—oh, Georgie!—have you heard anything?”

“No; but I know it. We always agreed that if either of us died when the other was not there, the one that was dead should come back to say good-bye. And I have waited for him all night, and he has not come.”

Mabel gazed at her in dismay. “Oh, but you are not building upon that, Georgie? How can it be any proof that he is alive? He might not be allowed to come.”

“He promised. Besides, I know he is alive,” persisted Georgia obstinately. “If he was dead, I should feel it.”

“Georgie, dear, you mustn’t go on like this. You will make yourself ill. Come and lie down a little, and try to go to sleep. I will tell you if he comes.” Mabel ended with a sob.

“If he does, I shall know,” murmured Georgia, as she lay down. “Thanks, Mab; I am so tired.”

Mabel waited only until she was asleep, and then, summoning Rahah to watch beside her, went in search of Dr Tighe. It so happened that she met him in the passage which led into the courtyard.

“Bad business this, Miss North. We could ill spare your brother. How is his poor wife?”

“She has borne up wonderfully so far, but—oh, Dr Tighe, I’m afraid her mind is going. She will persist that Dick is not dead.”

“Poor thing! can’t realise it yet,” said the doctor compassionately.

“No; it is quite a delusion. She says he is still alive, or she would know it. What can we do? I thought perhaps if she could see his body——”

“No, no. Better that the delusion should last for ever than she should see his body after those fiends have had to do with it.”

“But she must give up hope soon, and it will be such a fearful disappointment——”

“If the hope keeps her up through the next few days, so much the better. Afterwards, please God, she’ll have more effectual comfort than we could give her.”

“But I can’t help hoping too, and it will make the reality so much worse,” confessed Mabel, with an irrepressible sob.

“Woman alive! who cares about you?” cried the doctor furiously. “What do your little bits of feelings matter compared with hers? No, no; I beg your pardon, Miss North,” his tone softening.

“I’d get a fine wiggling if the Commissioner heard me, wouldn’t I? But you must remember how much you have got left, and your sister has nothing. For God’s sake, let her please herself with thinking that he’s all right for the present, if that comforts her at all. By-and-by the truth will come to her gradually, but she will have the child to think of, and the worst bitterness will be gone. Come, now, you’re brave enough for that, aren’t you? How is she—asleep just now? I’ll look in again later on. Now make up your mind to be unselfish about this.”

“Does he mean that generally I am selfish?” mused Mabel. “It never struck me before. But nobody seems to care about me. They all think that I have Eustace left. As if he could ever make up to me for Dick!” she laughed mirthlessly at the mere idea. “He will be coming in presently and making appropriate remarks. Oh dear, oh dear! if he had gone to the durbar and been killed instead of Dick, I believe I should have been *glad*. How dreadful it is! How can I ever marry him? But I know I shall never have the courage to tell him I want to give him up. What can I do?”

“Mabel, my poor little girl!” Mr Burgrave emerged from the passage, and limped towards her as she stood listlessly on the verandah. “You have slept badly, I fear? How is Mrs North?”

“She won’t believe that he is dead.” And with her eyes full of tears, Mabel repeated to him Georgia’s words.

“Very touching, very touching!” remarked the Commissioner, his tone breathing the deepest sym-

pathy. "Poor thing! it is unspeakably sad to see so strong a mind overthrown. You must find it very trying, poor child! I hope you are taking care of yourself?" His glance travelled over her, and Mabel remembered for the first time that she had slept in her clothes, and that her hair had not been touched since she had twisted it up roughly the night before on the first alarm.

"Oh, I know I'm not fit to be seen!" she cried impatiently. "But what does that signify?"

"It signifies very much. You must remember the natives in the fort. Their endurance—even their loyalty—may hang upon our success in keeping up appearances during the next few days. And we white men, also—surely it is a poor compliment to us to make such a sorry ob—figure—of yourself? Then there is your unfortunate sister. Is it likely to restore her mental balance to see you in such a dishevelled condition? Oblige me by changing your dress and doing something to your hair. It is a public duty at such a time."

"I wish you wouldn't bother!" said Mabel, weeping weakly. "I have no black things, and I can't bear to put on colours."

"My dear girl, is it for me to advise you as to your clothes?" The tone, half-severe and half-humorous, stung Mabel with a recollection of their conversation of ten days before. "Considering poor Mrs North's delusion, might it not be advisable to humour her, in so far as not to insist upon wearing mourning immediately?"

"Oh, very well," was the grudging reply, of which Mabel repented the next moment, adding contritely,

"I'm sorry to have been so cross, Eustace. I will try to be brave."

"That is what I expect of my little girl. She would never bring discredit upon my choice by showing the white feather. I rely upon her to set an example of cheerfulness to the whole garrison."

He bestowed upon her what Mabel inwardly stigmatised as a lofty kiss of encouragement before departing, and she obeyed him meekly, going at once to her room to change her dress. She was so angry with herself for having deserved his rebuke that she forgot to be angry with him. After all, it was well for her to have this severe master to please, if she was in danger of bringing reproach upon her country by her faint-heartedness. She was taking herself to task in this strain, when the sound of voices in the outermost of Georgia's two rooms, which was next to her own, interrupted her meditations.

"Oh dear! Georgie hasn't slept long," she lamented to herself. "Who is that talking to her, I wonder? Oh, Mr Anstruther, of course."

"I came in to see if there was anything I could do for you," she heard Fitz say. "I'm ashamed to have been so long in coming, but the fact is, I was up all night knocking down houses and setting coolies to cart away the remains, and when we had got the space all round pretty clear and came in, I was so dead tired that I just lay down and went to sleep where I was."

"Oh, you should have gone on resting while you had the chance," said Georgia. "Everybody is only too kind to me, and there's nothing I want done. Then we are really besieged now?"

"I suppose we might say that we are in a state of siege. At present all the tribes are holding *jirgahs* to consider the matter. Our outer circle of vedettes was driven in soon after we got here last night, but we held the houses facing the fort against a few spasmodic rushes until we had got the zone of fire cleared. The enemy are too close for comfort as it is, but at any rate they have a space to cross before they can get up to the walls."

"Then they are occupying the town?"

"Decidedly, if that means looting all the houses and firing most of them."

"Is our house burnt?"

"Almost as soon as you were out of it. I noticed the fire when I looked round once as we were driving. But I don't think the enemy can have been as close behind us as that. I fancy the servants who shirked coming with us were looting, and some one had knocked over a lamp."

"And how are things going with us here?"

"So-so. But you know, Mrs North, if it hadn't been for the Major and Colonel Graham, we might as well have taken refuge in a fowl-house as in this place. Long ago they got in all the stores they could without attracting attention, and everything else was ready to be moved at a moment's notice. They had their plans all cut and dried, too, and every man found his post assigned to him. The walls are good against anything but artillery, and the towers and loopholes and gates have all been put into some sort of repair."

"Yes," said Georgia, "and that is the best of the situation. Now for the worst."

“ Well, you know, it would all have been worst but for the Major, and every soul inside the walls is blessing him. The worst is that we have scraped together a preposterous number of non-combatants—some of them the wives and children of the sowars, of course, but a good many of them Hindus and bazaar-people of that sort, whom it would have been sheer murder to leave outside, but who will be no good to us whatever. All the old soldiers have been re-enlisted, and the boys are to make themselves useful, but there is a helpless crowd of women and children and elderly people to dispose of somehow. That’s the secret of your close quarters here. We can’t have the poor wretches anywhere near the walls, so they are put away in the central courts, where we can keep an eye upon them, and overawe them if necessary.”

“ Poor things! I must go and see after them,” murmured Georgia.

“ Of course, with all these extra mouths, we are not provisioned for a regular siege, unless we eat the horses, which ought to be saved in case we have to cut our way out at last. But the worst thing is that we have no artillery, not so much as a field-gun, and very little of anything else. The regiment have their carbines, of course, but the Commissioner’s Sikhs are the only men with rifles—except those of us who go in for big game shooting. However, as a set-off against that, the enemy have no big guns either. And then, it’s about the best season of the year for moving troops on this frontier, so that we ought to be relieved before very long.”

“But that’s only if the enemy don’t cut the canals.”

“Yes, I’m afraid they’re too sharp not to do that. It looks as if a dust-storm was coming on, which would help them if they set to work at once.”

“Have they made any pretence of offering terms?”

“The Amir sent his mullah this morning with a flag of truce. He couldn’t be allowed inside, so the Commissioner and Colonel Graham spoke to him from the walls. But there was no accepting what he offered.”

“What was it?”

“Poor old Ashraf Ali was awfully cut up about—what happened yesterday. He explained through the mullah that he arranged the ambuscade entirely for the benefit of the Commissioner, whom he really was anxious to have out of the way. It was a pure accident that the very last thing he could have wished happened instead. However, in order that his trouble mightn’t be wasted, he suggested that we should hand him over the Commissioner now. He will see that he gives no more trouble on this frontier, and it is open to the rest of us either to stay here unmolested, or to return to civilisation under a safe-conduct, just as we like.”

“You mean that he actually offers to guarantee the safety of every one else if the Commissioner gives himself up?”

“Practically that. Doesn’t it strike you as a little quaint?”

“Was that the Commissioner’s view of it?”

“I believe so. He remarked what a preposterous demand it was, when he had the responsibility of the

fort and the whole community on his shoulders. He doesn't intend to shirk his duty. The Colonel said it was a tremendous relief to hear how sensibly he took it. Some men would have insisted on giving themselves up forthwith, but he has too much to think of."

A wan smile showed itself on Georgia's face. "Well, if he intends to interpret his duty very strictly, we may wish he had gone," she said.

"I don't believe he is even technically in the right, and certainly I think the Colonel will have to organise a little mutiny if he insists upon bossing the show. Couldn't you turn on Miss North to induce him to moderate his pretensions a bit?" Mabel, in the next room, shook her fist unseen at the speaker.

"After all," said Georgia, "it's most unlikely that they would have kept their promise to protect us, even if he had given himself up."

"Very little doubt about that. From what the mullah said, it's clear that there are two parties in their camp, and I shouldn't care to say which is the stronger. Bahram Khan's following, besides his own men, who did all the looting last night, comprises the more troublesome of the frontier tribes and the chiefs who have grudges against the Amir, while Ashraf Ali has his loyal Sardars and the tribes which have always been friendly to us. If only we had the Major here!"

"You mean that he would play them off against one another?"

"Yes, and there's no one else to do it. Beltring and I wanted to try, because there's just the chance

that the tribes would listen to us, as we have been with him so much, but the Colonel won't let us leave the fort."

"No, it would be no good. You would only be risking your lives uselessly," said Georgia. "He has more influence over them than any man I ever knew, except my father."

"Ah, but, Mrs North, there's no time to lose. As soon as we have killed two or three of the lot, they'll all be against us, and the longer we hold out the worse it will be. Even if Bahram Khan doesn't succeed in bringing them over to his side at once, he will be intriguing against his uncle in secret."

"I know, but what can we do? I dare not make inquiries about Dick, for if the Amir is keeping him safe somewhere, it might put him into Bahram Khan's power. We can only wait."

"Oh, Mrs North, don't count on that," pleaded Fitz sorrowfully. "It's no good, believe me. Ashraf Ali knows he is dead as well as we do."

"But I know that he is not dead," said Georgia, and Fitz went out hastily. In the verandah he met Mabel.

"Oh, Miss North, I wanted to speak to you," he said, but she beckoned him imperiously aside.

"You seem to think it rather a fine thing to abuse a man who isn't there to defend himself," she said.

"Indeed?" he said, in astonishment. "I wasn't aware of it."

"Perhaps you didn't know that I could hear you when you were laughing at Mr Burgrave?"

"I certainly didn't know you were listening, but

I was not laughing at him. I merely said that he hadn't given himself up. Would you wish me to say that he had? "

" You hinted that it was wrong and cowardly of him, and that he was saving himself at the expense of every one else here, when you ought to know it was only his strong sense of duty that kept him back. Would you have gone? "

" Certainly not, if the burden of the defence rested on me, as the Commissioner fancies it does on him."

" You see! And you said yourself it would probably have been no good."

" So I say still. Bahram Khan has more on hand than a piece of private revenge. If we trusted to his safe-conduct, we should be in for Cawnpore over again."

" And after that you still make fun of Mr Burgrave for not going! It's a shame! I know he has made mistakes in the past, from our point of view, but I won't hear him called a coward. He is the most noble, lofty-minded man in the world, and I only wish I was more worthy of him! "

" You can't expect me to indorse that, any more than the Commissioner himself would," said Fitz. " If anything I have said about him has pained you, Miss North, I humbly beg your pardon; but please remember that I should never speak against him intentionally, simply because you think so highly of him."

" I only want you to understand that I am not going to ask him to moderate his pretensions, as you call it," went on Mabel, rather confused. " For

one thing, he wouldn't do it, and for another, now that Dick is gone, I must be guided by him."

"Quite so," said Fitz, somewhat drily. Then his tone changed. "I wanted to ask you what you thought about telling poor Mrs North something the mullah said this morning. It struck me that perhaps we ought to keep it dark for a bit, as the doctor thinks it a good thing she can't believe that the worst has happened. The poor old Amir wept as if for his own son when he heard that the Major was dead, and went himself to look for the body, intending to give it a state funeral. But when they got to the pass, it was gone. The Hasrat Ali Begum, who was in camp near, had broken *pardah* with her women as soon as the fight was over, and carried off the body and buried it. They were afraid of what Bahram Khan would do with it, you see, and at present they won't tell even the Amir where the grave is, but he sent word that he meant to build a tomb over it later on. Now, ought Mrs North to know?"

"I shouldn't think so, should you? I have never been much with people in trouble—I don't know how to deal with them. But I think it will be better not to tell her unless she asks."

"But she isn't likely to ask, is she? Oh, Miss North, if she might only be right! I don't believe there's a man in the fort that wouldn't gladly die to bring him back."

The expected dust-storm did not begin until the afternoon, and in the interval the besieged continued to strengthen their defences, disturbed only

by an intermittent rifle-fire. A party of the enemy had taken possession of General Keeling's old house, and lying down behind the low wall which surrounded the roof, were firing at any one they saw on the ramparts. Thanks to the efforts of Colonel Graham and Dick, the ruined parapet here had been repaired, but when there were messages to be sent from one point to another, the cry was "Heads down!" So skilfully were the enemy posted that no response to their annoying attentions was possible until a party of Sikhs, at considerable risk to life and limb, scaled the turrets flanking the gateway, the repair of which had not been completed owing to lack of time, and succeeded in commanding the roof of the old house. They had scarcely cleared it before the storm came on, and they were ordered down again, since it was generally believed that an assault would be attempted under cover of the wind and darkness. Nothing of the kind took place, however, and the garrison, who were kept under arms, chafed at their enforced inaction, and tried in vain to pierce the obscurity which surrounded them, while the wind howled and the dust rattled on the roofs. When, last of all, the rain poured down in sheets, and the air cleared sufficiently to allow the buildings beyond the zone of fire to become dimly visible, it was seen that the enemy had taken advantage of the storm for a different purpose. On the roof of General Keeling's house was now a rough stone breastwork, so constructed as to shelter its occupants even against the fire from the towers, and provided with loopholes so arranged as to allow the barrel of a rifle to be pointed through them in any direction.

"It looks to me as though we should have to rush the General's house and blow it up," said the Commissioner to Colonel Graham, as they stood in one of the turrets, peering into the sweeping rain, during the last few minutes of daylight. "That sangar makes our walls untenable."

"Then we shall have to raise them," was the laconic reply, as Colonel Graham passed his field-glass to his companion. "You may not have noticed that though the General's old stone house is the only one strong enough to support a sangar on the roof, the brick houses on both sides of it have been loop-holed. The place is a regular death-trap."

"Do you mean to say that in this short time they have prepared a position impregnable to our whole force?" asked Mr Burgrave incredulously.

"Quite possibly, but that isn't the question. Their numbers are practically unlimited; ours are not. I should be glad if you and I could come to an understanding at once. We are not here to exhibit feats of arms, but to keep the flag flying until we can be relieved, and to protect the unfortunate women and children down below there. Nothing would please me better than to lead an assault on the house yonder, but who's to defend the fort when the butcher's bill is paid? If we had only ourselves to consider, I might cut my way out with the troops and make a historic march to Rahmat-Ullah, but with the non-combatants it would be impossible. You see this?—or perhaps you don't see it, but I do. Well, are we to work together, or not?"

“ You are asking me to subordinate my judgment to yours ? ”

“ Politically, you are supreme here. From a military point of view——”

“ You think you ought to be ? Considering the office I hold, doesn't that strike you as rather a large order ? ”

“ Would you propose to occupy an independent and superior position from which to criticise my measures ? Surely you must see that is out of the question ? You may be Commissioner for the province, but I am commandant of this fort, and the troops are under my orders. The conclusion is pretty obvious, isn't it ? In such a situation as this, a single head is essential, and there must be no hint of divided councils. You and I have both got everything we prize in the world at stake here. Can we squabble over our relative positions in face of what lies before us ? ”

“ The question would come more gracefully from me to you, in the circumstances,” said Mr Burgrave, “ but I see your point. Let it be understood that the conduct of all military operations is vested in you, then. I reserve, of course, the right of private criticism, and of offering advice.”

“ And of putting the blame on me if things go wrong ! ” thought Colonel Graham, but he was too wise to give utterance to the remark. “ Do you care to make the round of the defences with me ? ” he asked. “ I should like to see how the new brickwork stands this deluge.”

As they emerged from the shelter of the tower into the rainy dusk, they were met by Fitz, who, like the

other civilians in the place, had enrolled himself as a volunteer. When he first spoke, his voice was inaudible, owing to a rushing, roaring sound which filled the air.

"Why, what's this?" shouted the Colonel.

"The canal, sir," answered Fitz, as loudly. "Winlock sent me to ask you to come and look at it."

"Is it in flood? Can the reservoir have burst?"

"We think the enemy have opened the sluices. The dead body of a white man was washed down just now. We saw it, though we couldn't reach it, and some one said it was Western, who was in charge at the canal works."

The Colonel and Mr Burgrave hurried along the rampart, sheltered from the enemy's fire by the gathering darkness, to the rear wall of the fort, the base of which was washed by the canal. The canal itself was part of the great system of irrigation-works by means of which, as the Commissioner had once complained, General Keeling had made Khemistan. A huge reservoir was constructed in the hills to receive the torrents of water which rushed down every ravine after a storm, and which, after carrying ruin and destruction in their path, ran fruitlessly to waste. By means of sluices the outflow was regulated with the minutest care, and the precious water husbanded so jealously that even in the hottest seasons it was possible to supply the canal which, with its many effluents, had converted the immediate surroundings of Alibad from a sandy waste into a garden. In view of the possible necessity of coping with an occasional rush of water, the banks were artificially raised, and the one opposite the south-

west angle of the fort, where the canal took a sudden bend, had been strengthened to a considerable height with masonry, to protect the cultivated land beyond it from inundation. This change in its course largely increased the force of the current at this point.

After a storm the placid canal always became a rushing torrent, on account of the accessions it received after leaving the reservoir, but none of those in the fort had ever seen it rise to the height it had reached on the present occasion. Colonel Graham uttered an exclamation of dismay when he looked out over the turbid stream, which seemed to be flung back from the opposite bank against the fort wall with even increased violence. Presently there was a lull in the storm, and by the aid of a lantern, which was lowered from the rampart, he was able to see that the current was actually scouring away the lower courses of the wall. The next moment the lantern was violently swept from the hand of the man who held the cord, as another rush of water came swirling round the tower at the angle of the wall, dashing its spray into the faces of the watchers. Every one of them felt the wall shake under the blow, and there was a murmur of uneasiness. Colonel Graham recovered himself first.

“ Turn out all the servants and coolies, Winlock,” he said, “ and shore up the wall with props and sand-bags as far as possible. We will stay here and watch whether the water rises any higher. It’s clear they hope that this south curtain will go,” he added to Mr Burgrave, “ and that then they will only have to walk in.”

“They must have a clever head among them,” said the Commissioner; “for they are evidently letting the water out a little at a time.”

“Ah, that’s the native engineer, no doubt. They would keep him alive to manage the machinery for them when they murdered poor Western. Look out, here’s another!”

Again the wall trembled perceptibly, but by this time the courtyard was full of eager workers, piling up earth and stones and beams and bags of sand, and anything else that could be found. Presently the Colonel called out to them to stop, for there was now the danger that the wall might fall outwards instead of inwards, and they waited in unwilling idleness, while the two men on the rampart watched the current anxiously, and measured the distance of its surface from the parapet. Then came a more violent rush of water than any before, and to Colonel Graham and Mr Burgrave the wall seemed to rock backwards and forwards under them. When they looked into each other’s faces once more, they could scarcely believe that it was still standing.

“That’s the last, evidently,” said the Colonel, “a final effort. The water’s getting lower already. We’re safe for to-night, but if they had only had the patience to wait till this rain was over, we could never have stood the force of water they could have turned on. And as it is, a child’s popgun might almost account for this bit of wall now.”

CHAPTER XV.

“THE OLD FIRST HEROIC LESSONS.”

“WHY, Mrs North!” Disturbed in his task of supervising the proceedings of a nervous native assistant, whose mind was less occupied with his dispensing than with the bullets which flattened themselves occasionally upon the pavement outside the surgery, Dr Tighe had turned suddenly to find Georgia at his elbow. “Can I do anything for you?” he asked kindly, looking with professional disapproval at her pale face and weary eyes.

“I want you to let me help you in the hospital.”

“And I thought you were a sensible woman! Will you tell me if you call this wise, now?”

“I think it would help me to have something to do.”

“But not this. What am I to say to the Major when—if—when I see him again, if you overtask your strength?”

“I see you think I am mad,” she said earnestly, “but I *know* he is alive. But the suspense is so dreadful, doctor. It’s certain that he is wounded, and I can scarcely doubt he is a prisoner; and what may be happening to him at any moment?”

It is killing me, and I must live—for both their sakes.” The doctor nodded quickly. “And I thought if I could do something to help those who were suffering as he is, it might—oh, I don’t know—it might make me tired enough to sleep again.”

“A good idea!” said Dr Tighe, in his most matter-of-fact tones. “You shall relieve me of half my dressings, by all means, and I’ll turn over to you the out-patient work among these unfortunate women and children. You can leave that dispensing, Babu”—the assistant, who had been listening for the thud of the bullets, started violently—“and go round the wards with the memsahib.”

From his own cases on the opposite side of the improvised wards Dr Tighe glanced across at Georgia several times, remarking with approval that her face and figure were losing their look of utter weariness as she went about her work. She was giving her whole mind to it, that was evident, and for the time her own anxiety was pushed into the background. The number of patients to be treated was considerable, for besides the men who had been wounded at the fight in the Akrah Pass, there were a good many casualties due to the enemy’s fire since the siege had begun. The work was therefore heavy, but as soon as the dressings were finished Dr Tighe bustled up to Georgia and pointed out a new opening for her energies.

“The Colonel wants sacks made—millions of ’em—for sand-bags,” he said. “He was at his wits’ end about it this morning, tried to get the native women to sew them, and they wouldn’t.”

“ Oh, why didn't he ask us ? ” cried Georgia. “ We would have worked our fingers to the bone.”

“ I'm sure you would, and it's likely he'd ask it of you, isn't it ? But why all the refugees should have board and lodging given them free, I don't know. Why, they wouldn't even make the sacks for payment ! A lot of them said they couldn't sew, and the rest seemed to think they were being persecuted when they were asked to do it. But you know how to get round them, Mrs North. We can't very well say that if a woman doesn't sew a sack a day out she goes—sounds a bit brutal—but you'll manage to set them to work, I'm sure. I'll tell Colonel Graham you've taken the matter in hand, and he'll be for ever grateful.”

Unpromising though the task seemed, Georgia succeeded in finding six women who consented to sew if the Memsahibs would do so too, and a working-party was organised in the little courtyard, from which Mr Hardy and the men-servants were rigorously banished for the time. Since the need of sand-bags—at any rate in such numbers—had not been foreseen, the proper material was lacking, but all the tents in the fort were promptly requisitioned, and their canvas utilised. The regimental tailors cut out the sacks, delivering them into the charge of Rahah, and inside the courtyard Mrs Hardy and Georgia superintended the unskilled workers, while Flora and Mabel took a pride in proving their willingness to blister their fingers for their country. It was fortunate that fine needlework was not required, for the native women's ideas of sewing were rudimentary in the extreme, but their two instructresses succeeded at last in convincing them, by precept and

example, that to sew one side only of a seam was unnecessary as a decoration and not calculated materially to further the usefulness of a sack. When this lesson had been sufficiently impressed upon the pupils, Georgia sat down in the doorway of her room to divide the *pice* which Colonel Graham had entrusted to her for distribution among them. The sun was setting over the hill beyond the fort, and the women, as they sat cross-legged on the floor, seized the fact that the light was in their eyes as an excuse for turning round to gaze greedily at the money which Georgia was apportioning on a chair. Suddenly there was a whizz and a noisy clatter. A bullet had grazed Georgia's hand and struck the chair, sending the coins flying, and it was followed by a burst of firing, which caused the terrified work-women to drop their sacks and exclaim with one voice that they were dead.

"Down! down!" cried Georgia, setting the example herself, "and crawl round to the other verandah. They are firing from the hill, but they won't be able to see us there."

Dragging with her one woman who was paralysed with fright, she induced the others to follow her, and when they were out of the line of fire, proceeded to examine the terrific wounds from which one and all declared themselves to be suffering. Curiously enough, no one was badly hurt. Two had scratches, and one a nasty bruise from a ricochet shot, but of severe injuries there were none. Georgia dressed the wounds and comforted the sufferers with one or two *pice* extra, and then sent them back to their own quarters, thus allowing admittance to Colonel

Graham, Mr Hardy, the Commissioner, and Fitz, who had been informed by the horrified servants that the enemy were firing into the Memsahibs' courtyard. Their anxiety raised to the highest pitch by the shrieks from within, the four gentlemen were held at bay in the passage by the heroic Rahah, who informed them that they must pass over her body before they should break the *pardah* of the women assembled under her mistress's protection. Just as they were at last admitted a cry from behind made them look round, to see an unfortunate water-carrier who had been passing along the rampart falling into the courtyard.

“We must get up a *parados* on that side,” said Colonel Graham when the wounded man had been sent to the hospital. “They command the inside of the whole east curtain from that hill. Your sand-bags will be made useful sooner than we expected, Mrs North.”

“But what is to happen to us?” cried Mabel. “Are we to stay here to be shot at?”

“Calm yourself, my dear girl,” said Mr Burgrave, in gently reproving tones. “You are in no danger at the present moment.”

“You see, Miss North,” said the Colonel, “I don't want to have to put you either in the hospital courtyard or among the native refugees, and there is nowhere else. After all, this court is so small that the enemy can't possibly command more than the east side, and we'll put that right by hanging curtains along the *verandah*.”

“Why, what good would that be against bullets?”

“The curtain wouldn't stop them, certainly, but

our friends up there are very careful of their ammunition, and never waste a shot. Not being able to see whether any one is in the verandah, they won't aim at it. It was the sight of a whole party assembled here that was irresistible."

"But is Georgia to live in darkness?" demanded Georgia's self-constituted champion.

"Nonsense, Mab! There are three other verandahs to sit in. After all, one expects bullets in a siege," said Georgia.

"That's the right spirit, Mrs North," said Colonel Graham heartily. "As soon as it's dusk we'll have the matting up from the club-house—messroom, I mean—floor, and nail it along the roof of this verandah and across the corner where the passage is. Then you'll be safe from anything but chance shots, and those, I'm afraid, we can none of us guard against."

"But are those fellows up there to pot at the ladies without our ever having a chance to pay them back, sir?" cried Fitz.

"I was coming to that. Of course the plan is to clear us off the east rampart so that a force from the town may rush it under cover of the fire from the hill, and therefore the parados must be our first care. Still, I think we can spare a few sand-bags for the two western towers, and if we arrange a little sangar on the top of each when it is dark, we can show our chivalrous friends the snipers to-morrow what it feels like to be sniped. Tell Winlock to set all the servants to work filling bags and baskets, and anything else they can find, with earth at once."

"We seem to hold our own fairly well at present,"

said Mr Burgrave as Fitz departed, and the Colonel stood looking narrowly at the threatened verandah and the scattered work-materials with which it was strewn.

“ We seem to—yes, but it is simply because we have not been tried as yet. There is far too great a length of wall for us to hold against a well-planned attack—say from two sides at once. Why they haven’t put us to the test before I can’t imagine. It’s not like their usual tactics to let things drag on in this way.”

“ I am of opinion that they dislike crossing the cleared space, and intend to remain at a discreet distance and starve us out. If only they stick to that, we ought to be relieved long before matters come to a crisis.”

“ No, it’s not that ! ” cried the Colonel irritably. “ There’s something behind that we don’t see. If there was any possibility of their having guns, I should say they were waiting for them. But where are they to get them from unless they have surprised Rahmat-Ullah, which we have no reason to suppose ? They have some dodge on hand, though, I’m certain.”

“ Is there any weak point at which they could be aiming ? ”

“ Man, this place is nothing but weak points. If those fellows on the hill knew what they were about, they could enfilade our north and south ramparts as well as cover the eastern one. The south curtain is so weak now that an elephant or a battering-ram—let alone a well-planted shell or two—could knock it over, and the canal on that side is getting lower

every day. The water-carriers have to go down a dozen steps now, and it's only the enemy's fear for their own precious skins that prevents their picking them off from the opposite bank. We could pepper them from the rampart ; they know that, and they haven't the sense to pour in an oblique fire from the hill. I suppose, too, it hasn't occurred to you that if they took it into their heads to blow us up, one or two plucky fellows could get close up to the walls under cover of a general attack, and lay a train at their leisure. It's impossible to fire transversely from the loopholes in the towers without exposing pretty nearly one's whole body, and as to depressing a rifle and firing point-blank down from the parapet, well——”

Mr Burgrave understood the pause to mean that the consequences would probably be very uncomfortable for the holder of the rifle, and said no more. The night passed without further alarm, save that Georgia found it would be dangerous to have a light in her rooms unless door and shutters were both closed. The glimmer from the window, even when only seen through the matting curtain, attracted two or three bullets immediately, and it was evident that the choice must be made between air and light. During the hours of darkness the besieged worked hard at their defences, and succeeded in erecting a more or less effectual shelter along the inside of the east rampart, and also a sand-bag parapet at the summit of the two western towers. The gateway turrets on the north-east, which were now exposed to the fire from the hill in the rear as well as to that from General Keeling's house in front, were strength-

ened in the same way. Behind these shelters the best marksmen of the garrison took up their posts, and as soon as the bullets began to fly from the hill, seized the opportunity of pointing out to the enemy that the state of things had altered to some extent in the night. Since it was impossible for a man on either side to fire without exposing himself slightly, a return shot was the instant comment on this imprudence, and hence, before the morning was over, both parties were lying low and glaring at their opponents' sangars, ready to shoot but not caring to be shot. Helmets on the one side and turbans on the other, raised cautiously on rifle-barrels above the breastwork, drew a few shots, but the nature of the trick was quickly perceived by both parties, and the sniping continued to languish.

“ Their rifles seem to carry as far as ours,” remarked Mr Burgrave to Colonel Graham.

“ So they ought,” was the grim reply. “ Most of them, if not all, are ours. They are stolen and smuggled wholesale into Ethiopia, and Bahram Khan has borrowed them to arm his followers with. That's how they manage to give us so much trouble. In the matchlock days, when this place was built, we could have laughed at their shooting from the hill.”

“ What is that ? ” said the Commissioner suddenly, putting up his eye-glass ; “ a pile of cannon-balls ? It was not there last night.”

They were standing in one of the gateway turrets, and the heap to which he pointed was visible upon the cleared space, in front of the entrance to a lane between two of the houses occupied by the enemy.

Colonel Graham laid down his field-glass with an exclamation of disgust.

“ Cannon-balls ! It’s *heads*—human heads—heads of our men. Those fiends have surprised one of our posts—Sultanibagh probably, beyond Shah Nawaz. I telegraphed to the Jemadar in charge to retire upon Rahmat-Ullah, as there was no chance of their getting here safely, but the wires must have been cut before they got the message, or else the men have been ambushed on their way. Well, Bahram Khan has put himself beyond the pale of mercy this time, even with our Government, I should imagine.”

As the light grew stronger the sickening trophy was perceived from other parts of the fort, and the men of the Khemistan Horse began to become impatient. It appeared that a deserter had ventured close under the walls in the night, in order to taunt the garrison with some unexplained reverse, the nature of which was now made manifest. They were asked how long Sinjāj Kīlin’s sowars had been content to hide behind stone walls, instead of coming out to fight on horseback in the open, and a variety of interesting and savoury information was added as to the precise nature of the tortures in store for all, whether officers or men, who fell into Bahram Khan’s hands. To the men who had so long dominated the frontier, this abuse was intolerably galling, and the troopers were gathering in corners with sullen faces, and asking one another why they were kept back from washing out the disgrace in blood. They had now been in the fort the best part of a week, no attack in force had been made, and yet there had not been the slightest attempt to drive off the enemy or inflict

any loss upon him. Ressaldar Badullah Khan voiced this feeling to Colonel Graham a little later, when the Colonel had passed with a judicious lack of apparent notice the scowling groups of men who were discussing the state of affairs.

“ Our faces are black, sahib,” said the native officer, in response to the question put to him. “ Bahram Khan and his *badmashes* laugh at our beards, and we are pent up here like women. We are better men than they—we have proved it in every fight since first Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib raised the regiment—why then (so say the sowars), is it forbidden to us to issue forth with our horses, and sweep the base-born rabble outside from the face of the earth ? ”

“ Is the regiment complaining of the course I choose to take, Ressaldar ? ”

“ Nay, sahib ; the sowars say that it is the will of the Kumpsioner Sahib which is being done.”

“ They are wrong. It is mine. What could the regiment do on horseback in the streets of the town, with the enemy firing from roofs and loopholes ? We have not a man too many in the fort now, and yet, Ressaldar, I anticipate a sortie in force before long, though not in review order.”

The Ressaldar’s eyes gleamed. “ May the news be told to the regiment, sahib ? ” he asked.

“ Could they refrain from shouting it to the next man who taunts them ? No, Ressaldar ; tell them to trust me as they have always done hitherto. There will be work to be done before many days, but I cannot set mutinous men to do it.”

Badullah Khan went out, meeting Woodworth on the threshold.

"Would you mind coming up to the north-western tower, sir?" asked the adjutant, when he had closed the door. "The enemy seem to be doing something in that direction which I can't quite make out."

"What sort of thing?" asked Colonel Graham, rising.

"I would rather not give an opinion until you have seen what there is to see, sir," was the reply, so unwontedly cautious that the Colonel prepared for a heavy blow. Woodworth followed him up the narrow winding stairs in silence, and pointed to the stretch of desert on the northern side of the town, across which two long strings of men and animals were slowly passing in a westerly direction. The Colonel started, examined the moving objects through his field-glass, and called to his orderly—

"Ask Beltring Sahib to come here at once."

Almost before Beltring, breathless, had mounted the staircase, he was greeted by a question. "Beltring, are there any guns at Nalapur?"

"No, sir. At least, there are two old field-pieces in front of the palace, but that's all."

"Are they in working order?"

"They use them for firing salutes, sir, not for anything else, I believe."

"Still, that shows they are safe to work, and here they are. Where will they mount them, should you say, Woodworth?"

"On the hill, sir. The slope on the far side is comparatively easy for getting them up."

"True, and from the brow there they could knock

the place about our ears in a couple of hours. At all costs we must keep them from getting the range to-day. They will have no range-finders, that's one good thing, and if we can secure a night's respite, it'll be a pity if we don't make good use of it. Tell our marksmen to fire at anything they see moving up there. Those guns must not be placed in position before sunset. And then tell all the other officers and volunteers to meet me on the south rampart immediately.”

The council of war which assembled on the rampart, sheltered by the south-western tower, was sufficiently informal to make the hair of any stickler for military etiquette stand on end, but its proceedings were absolutely practical. The Colonel, beside whom stood Mr Burgrave, stated the situation briefly.

“You have seen the two guns which the enemy intend to mount on the hill there. Once they get them into position and find our range, we may as well retire into the vaults and wait until we are smoked out, for there is no possible shelter above ground. With our small force it is hopeless to detach a party to sally out and capture the guns in the open—more especially since the enemy hold the town between us and them. Still, they have plenty to do in getting the guns across the canal and dragging them up the hill, and we must make it our business to prevent them from opening fire to-day, and to-night those guns must be taken. I propose to leave the Commissioner in charge of the fort, with ten of his own Sikhs and fifty sowars under Ressaldar Ghulam Rasul. Every civilian who can hold a weapon must also do duty. I shall take a hundred and fifty dismounted sowars

and thirty Sikhs, with all the enrolled volunteers, and make a dash for the hill under cover of darkness. If we succeed we shall have averted a great danger ; if we fail, the fort will be no worse off than if we had hung about and done nothing. I am confident that the Commissioner will fight to the end, and not allow himself to be tempted by any offer of terms."

" Know the beggars too well," said Mr Burgrave laconically.

" That's the main scheme ; now for details. To reach the hill, the canal must be crossed in any case. The most obvious plan would undoubtedly be for one force to rendezvous silently in the shadow of the west curtain, traverse the irrigated land, and restore the bridge at the foot of the hill sufficiently to cross by it. But the enemy could sweep the whole route from their positions both in the town and on the hill, and they will be very much on the alert to-night. My idea is to cross the canal here from the water-gate, and march the first part of the distance along the bank, so as to come upon the enemy from the side he won't expect us. He knows we have neither boat nor bridge, and the water is still deep enough along the wall to be impassable to any but good swimmers."

" Then how do you propose to cross ? " asked Mr Burgrave.

" There I must invite suggestions. We have no time for building boats or bridges, and the water-gate offers no facilities for it either. A raft, possibly. What do you think, Runcorn ? "

" A raft supported on inflated skins, sir ? " asked the engineer officer. " That might be practicable,

but it would have to be very small, for the passage to the gate is so narrow that all the materials must be taken to the water's edge separately and put together there. There is no standing-ground of any sort but the wretched shaky steps that the water-carriers use, so that we can't well lower things from the wall.”

“And the time spent in ferrying the force over would be interminable, not to mention the risk of discovery by the enemy,” said Colonel Graham.

His subordinates looked at one another. Various suggestions had been hazarded and rejected, when a hesitating voice made itself heard. The speaker was Mr Hardy, who had joined the group a few minutes earlier, with a message to the Colonel from one of the wounded officers in the hospital.

“In my Oxford days,” he said, “I remember a pleasant walk through the meadows—” His hearers gasped. Why should these peaceful recollections be obtruded at such a moment? “There was one point at which the path crossed a considerable stream, and a punt that ran on wires was placed there. I'm afraid I am not very intelligible,” he smiled nervously. “I can't describe the mechanism in technical language, but the punt was fastened to one wire, and the other was free and moved on pulleys, so that you could pull yourself across, or draw the punt towards you if it happened to be at the opposite bank.”

“Padri,” said Colonel Graham, “it's clear that you are an unsuspected mechanical genius. This is the very thing we want, though we must use rope instead of wire.”

“But we have even got that, sir,” said Runcorn eagerly. “Timson was boasting that he had saved all the stores of his department—miles of telegraph wire amongst them. Now he’ll have to disgorge.”

“Then will you set about the construction of the ferry, Runcorn? You can’t begin work on the spot until night, but you can get your materials ready. Requisition anything you want, of course.”

“May we make a suggestion, sir?” said Fitz Anstruther, coming forward with Winlock as the council broke up. Signals of intelligence had been passing between the two for some time, and they had held a whispered consultation while the ferry was being discussed.

“Why, what plot have you on hand?”

It was Winlock who answered. “We thought that it might make all the difference to your success, sir, if a diversion could be arranged to distract the enemy’s attention. We two know every foot of these hills from *chikor*-shooting, and if we might pick out a dozen or so of the sowars who have constantly gone with us out hunting as beaters, we could make a sham attack. We know of a splendid place on the side of a hill, inaccessible from below, which commands the camp of the hostile tribes, and we thought if we sent up a signal rocket or two, to be answered from the fort, and then poured in as many volleys as there was time for, it might make a good impression. Of course, as soon as they try to get round us and rush the hill, we must retire, to keep them from finding out how few we are; but the main force ought to have settled the guns by that time, and

we might rendezvous on the hill and march back together.”

“It sounds feasible,” said the Colonel slowly; “but how do you propose to cross the canal?”

“We don’t mean to cross it in going, sir. Anstruther says we can clamber along the base of this wall from the water-gate round the south-western tower, so as to get on to dry land under the west curtain.”

“I know it’s possible, sir,” said Fitz eagerly. “I’ve done it more than once when the canal was low, and it’ll be easier now that the bricks are so much washed away. And of course we shall be very careful in crossing the irrigated land—all of us in khaki, you see, and taking advantage of every bit of cover—and unless we run right into one of the enemy’s outposts, I don’t see how they are to spot us. And think of the benefit it will be to have their attention distracted from your movement!”

“You realise that you are taking your lives in your hands? You will probably have to swim the canal higher up to join us, and, after all, we may not be able to wait for you. Your men will be volunteers, of course? They must understand that it’s a desperate business.”

“Yes, sir; but they’ll come like a shot. They’ve been out with us after *markhor*, and we’ve been in some tight places in the mountains. May we have what rockets we want?”

“By all means. Good luck go with you! I wish I was coming too!”

“That’s really handsome of the C.O.,” said Fitz, dodging a bullet as he clattered down the stairs into

the courtyard with Winlock. " Grand firework display to-night ! What a pity that the ladies and all the refugees can't have front seats on the ramparts to watch the *tamasha* ! "

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DARKEST HOUR.

“SAHIB, there is a man under the wall on the east side.”

“How did he come there?” demanded Colonel Graham angrily. “What are the sentries doing?”

“The night is so dark, sahib, that he crept up unnoticed. He is the holy mullah Aziz-ud-Din, and desires speech with your honour.”

“The Amir’s mullah? You are sure of it?”

“I know his voice, sahib. He is holding his hands on high to show that he has no weapons.”

“I suppose we may as well see what he has to say,” said the Colonel to Mr Burgrave, with whom he had been making final arrangements, and the two men climbed the steps to the east rampart. Once there, and looking over into the darkness, it was some little time before their eyes could distinguish the dim figure at the foot of the wall.

“Peace!” said Colonel Graham.

“It is peace, sahib. I bear the words of the Amir Ashraf Ali Khan. He says, ‘It is now out of my power to save the lives of the sahibs, and I will not deceive them, knowing that a warrior’s death amid the ruins

of their fortress will please them better than to fall into the hands of my thrice-accursed nephew, who has stolen the hearts of my soldiers from me. But this I can do. The houses next to the canal on this side of the fort are held by my own bodyguard, faithful men who have eaten of my salt for many years, and I have there six swift camels hidden. Let the Mem-sahibs be entrusted to me, especially those of the household of my beloved friend Nāth Sahib, and I will send them at once to Nalapur, where they shall be in sanctuary in my own palace, and I will swear—I who kept my covenant with the Sarkar until the Sarkar broke it—that death shall befall me before any harm touches them.' ”

“ Why is this message sent to-night ? ” asked Colonel Graham.

“ Because Bahram Khan is preparing a great destruction, sahib, and the heart of Ashraf Ali Khan bleeds to think that the houses of his friends Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib and Nāth Sahib should both be blotted out in one day.”

“ Carry my thanks and those of the Commissioner Sahib to Ashraf Ali Khan, but tell him that the Mem-sahibs will remain with us. Their presence would only place him in greater danger, and he would not be able to protect them. But we can. They will not fall into the hands of Bahram Khan.”

“ It is well, sahib.” The faint blur which represented the messenger melted into the surrounding blackness and Colonel Graham turned to his companion.

“ It will be your business to see to that, if the enemy break in. Haycraft comes with me. We must leave

Flora in your charge. Don't let her fall into their hands any more than Miss North."

"I promise," said Mr Burgrave, and their hands met in the darkness.

"Thanks. I think we have settled everything now. We don't start for an hour yet, and if you like to explain things to Miss North——"

"I should prefer to say nothing unless the necessity arises."

"I never thought of your going into details, but she must know something, surely? Flora will learn the state of affairs from Haycraft; Mrs North will pick it up from the Hardys and her ayah, and Miss North will probably expect— But please yourself, of course."

"I will go and talk to her for a little while. I have scarcely seen her all day."

Mr Burgrave's tone was constrained. It seemed to him almost impossible to meet Mabel at this crisis, and abstain from any allusion to the terrible duty which had just been laid upon him. He was not an imaginative man, and no forecast of the scene burned itself into his brain, as would have been the case with some people, but the oppression of anticipation was heavy upon him. For him the dull horror in his mind overshadowed everything, and it was with a shock that he found Mabel to be in one of her most vivacious and aggressive moods. She was walking up and down the verandah outside her room as if for a wager, turning at each end of the course with a swish of draperies which sounded like an angry breeze, and she hailed his arrival with something like enthusiasm, simply because he was some one to talk to.

"Flora is crying on Fred's—I mean Mr Haycraft's—shoulder somewhere," she said; "and Mrs Hardy and Georgia are having a prayer-meeting with the native Christians. They wanted me to come too; but I don't feel as if I could be quiet, and I shouldn't understand, either. What is going to happen, really?"

"The Colonel proposes to make a sortie and capture the two guns which the enemy have brought up. There is, I trust, every prospect of his succeeding."

Mabel stamped her foot. "Why can't you tell me the truth, instead of trying to sugar things over?" she demanded. "It would be much more interesting."

"You must allow me to decide what is suitable for you to hear," said Mr Burchgrave, his mind still so full of that final duty of his that he spoke with a serene indifference which Mabel found most galling.

"I don't allow you to do anything of the sort. I wish you wouldn't treat me as if I was a baby. It's like telling me yesterday that all the fresh milk in the place was to be reserved for us women and the wounded, as if I wanted to be pilloried as a lazy, selfish creature, doing nothing and demanding luxuries!"

"My dear little girl, I am sure there isn't a man in the garrison who would consent to your missing any comfort that the place can furnish."

"That's just it. I want to feel the pinch—to share the hardships. But of course you don't understand—you never do." She stopped and looked at him. "I don't know how it is, Eustace, but you seem some-

how to stir up everything that is bad in my nature. I could die happy if I had once shocked you thoroughly."

He recoiled from her involuntarily. "Do you think it is a time to joke about death when it may be close upon you?" he asked, with some severity.

"That sounds as if you were a little shocked," said Mabel meditatively. "But you know, Eustace, whenever you tell me to do anything—I mean when you express a wish that I should do anything—I feel immediately the strongest possible impulse to do exactly the opposite."

"But the impulse has never yet been translated into action?" he asked, with the indulgent smile which was reserved for Mabel when she talked extravagantly.

"I'm ashamed to say it hasn't."

"Then I am quite satisfied. I can scarcely aspire to regulate your thoughts just at present, can I? But so long as you respect my wishes——"

"Oh, what a lot of trouble it would save if we were all comfortably killed to-night!" cried Mabel, with a sudden change of mood. Mr Burgrave was shocked, and showed it. "I'm in earnest, Eustace."

"My dear child, you can hardly expect me to believe that you would welcome the horrors which the storming of this place would entail?"

"Oh no; of course not. You are so horribly literal. Can't you see that my nerves are all on edge? I do wish you understood things. If you won't talk about what's going to be done to-night, do go away, and don't stay here and be mysterious."

"Dear child, do you think I shall judge you

hardly for this feminine weakness? You need not be afraid of hurting or shocking me. Say anything you like; I shall put it down to the true cause. If your varying moods have taught me nothing else, at least I have learnt since our engagement to take your words at their proper valuation."

"If you pile many more loads of obligation upon me, I shall expire!" said Mabel sharply, only to receive a kind smile in return. Anything more that she might have said, in the amiable design of shocking him beyond forgiveness, was prevented by the appearance of Mrs Hardy.

"Is it true that you are going to arm all the civilians in the place, Mr Burgrave?" she demanded of the Commissioner.

"It is thought well—merely as a precautionary measure."

"Then I do beg and beseech you to give Mr Hardy a rifle that won't go off, or we shall all be shot."

"We will get the Padri to go round and hand out fresh cartridges, instead of giving him a gun," said Mr Burgrave seriously, but Mabel burst into a peal of hysterical laughter, which was effectual in putting a stop to further conversation, and he returned to the outer courtyard, where the men chosen for the forlorn hope were mustering in readiness for the start. Fitz and Winlock and their small party had left already, officers and men alike wearing the native grass sandals instead of boots, as they had been accustomed to do in their hunting expeditions, and it was known that they had scrambled along the wall and round the base of the south-western

tower in safety. The ferry had by this time been successfully constructed by Runcorn and his assistants, one of whom had undertaken the very unpleasant task of swimming across the ice-cold canal to pass the first wire rope round one of the posts which registered the height of the water on the opposite bank. Ball ammunition in extra quantities was served out to the whole force, for although Colonel Graham hoped to confine himself entirely to cold steel, for the sake of quietness, he was determined to be able to reply to the enemy's fire, should their attention unfortunately be aroused. The men were marched down in parties to the water-gate, and ferried over as quickly as the confined space would allow, and when all had crossed, the raft was drawn back to the gateway, and the wire disconnected. It had been decided that this was imperative, lest the enemy should take advantage of the ferry to cross the canal while the attention of the garrison was occupied by an attack in front. If the forlorn hope returned victorious, it would be easy to reconstruct the ferry by throwing a rope to them from the rampart, while if they were compelled to retreat, the raft was so small that to employ it under fire would entail a useless sacrifice of life, and the fugitives would do better to swim.

Then began a weary waiting-time for those in the fort. The night was moonless, so that it was impossible to distinguish any movement, whether on the part of friend or of foe. At last a rocket, rising from the cliff which overhung the town on the north-west, and which Fitz and Winlock had indicated as their goal, showed that they, at least, had

so far been successful. The rocket sent up from the fort in reply was answered by another from the cliff, and this was immediately followed by the distant sound of brisk firing, which seemed to cause considerable perturbation in the parts of the town occupied by the enemy. Lights moved about hurriedly from place to place, horns were blown, and there was a confused noise of angry shouting. The garrison did their best, by opening fire from the wall and towers, to increase the effect of the surprise, but without much hope of hitting anything, for the moving lights did not afford very satisfactory targets. In reply, a dropping fire broke out from the houses opposite, which was maintained for some time, but with little spirit, and slackened gradually. Scarcely had Mr Burgrave given the order to cease fire, however, when a heavy fusillade was heard on the west of the fort, though not from the hill. The sound appeared to come from the point at which the bridge, now in ruins, had crossed the canal, a point which it had not hitherto been known that the enemy were occupying, and which Colonel Graham had not intended to approach. His force should have been far to the left of it by this time, and already mounting the hill.) The most probable explanation seemed to be that they had missed their way in the darkness, and following the bank of the canal too far, had fallen into an ambuscade posted at the ruins of the bridge to guard against any attempt to cross for the purpose of capturing the guns. The Commissioner and his garrison waited and listened in the deepest anxiety, straining their eyes to try and perceive, from the flashes of the rifles, which way

the fight was tending. But the firing ceased suddenly, as that on the farther side of the enemy's position had done some time before. There was nothing to do but wait.

Suddenly, after a long interval, a piteous wailing arose at the rear of the fort, from the opposite bank of the canal. A native stood there, one of the water-carriers who had accompanied the force, abjectly entreating to be fetched over, since the enemy were at his heels. To employ the ferry at such a moment was not to be thought of, but a rope was thrown from the steps of the water-gate, and the miserable wretch, plunging in, caught it, and was drawn across. He told a terrible tale as he stood dripping and shivering in the passage leading to the gate. Colonel Graham's force had been attacked, shortly after leaving the canal bank, by overwhelming numbers of the enemy, who had first poured in a withering fire, and then rushed forward to complete the destruction with their knives and tulwars. The *bhisti* himself was the only man who had escaped, and the enemy had pursued him to the very edge of the canal. The sharpest-sighted men in the fort, sent to the rampart to test the truth of this statement as far as they could by starlight, were obliged to confirm it. There was undoubtedly a large body of the enemy on the other side of the canal. They were lying down behind the high bank, so as to be sheltered from the fire of the garrison.

"To cut off fugitives, I suppose," muttered Mr Burgrave, half to himself and half to Ressaldar Ghulam Rasul. "That looks as though the massacre

were not quite so complete as—Hark! I thought I heard a sound from the hill. Can our glorious fellows have made a last dash for it after all—some few who escaped?”

The men on the rampart stood like statues to listen, but failed to distinguish anything that might confirm the Commissioner's surmise. The air seemed full of sound—footfalls, a murmur from the town, a stray shot or two from the same direction, and on the west a kind of shuffling noise. The enemy were taking up their positions for the attack. Mr Burgrave sent orders to the guard at the water-gate to let the air out of the inflated skins which supported the raft, so as to sink it to the level of the water, and this was at once done. When he had posted a sentry in the passage and another on the rampart above it, he was able to leave that side of the fort to defend itself, since the enemy had no means of crossing to assail it. To occupy the whole range of wall with the absurdly small force at his disposal was obviously impossible, and he therefore placed ten men in each of the larger towers, from which, with the usual amount of trouble and risk, a flanking fire could be obtained, and twelve in the two gateway turrets, retaining the Ressaldar and sixteen men as a reserve, ready to make a dash for any point that might be specially threatened. If the garrison should be driven from the walls, those who escaped were to make for the hospital, where the women and children would take refuge, and the last stand was to be made. Having ordered his forces to their stations, the Commissioner went the round of the towers to encourage

the men. His own Sikhs he could deal with well enough, but he felt that it was the irony of fate which obliged him to urge the sowars of the Khemistan Horse to show themselves worthy of their first commander, General Keeling, and it seemed as if the same thought had occurred to the men, for they scowled at him resentfully when they heard the mighty name from his lips.

The bad news brought by the fugitive spread through the fort with astonishing rapidity. The native women, whom Georgia had succeeded in soothing into some sort of calmness before the departure of the forlorn hope, filled the air with their wailings, until Ismail Bakhsh, who was head of the civilian guard detailed for the defence of the hospital, threatened to fire a volley among them if they were not quiet. Flora Graham's ayah was gossiping with a friend among these women when the news arrived, and she rushed with it at once to her mistress's room. Poor Flora had shut herself up alone to pray for the safety of her father and lover, and was following in thought every step of their perilous march. She had just reached with them the summit of the hill, and rushed upon the guard round the guns, when the ayah burst in with the news that the worst had happened. The sudden revulsion of feeling was too much for Flora. Her usual self-control deserted her, and she ran wildly across the courtyard to Georgia's room. Georgia was lying down, talking softly in the dark to Mabel, who sat beside her, and both sprang up at Flora's entrance.

"What is it? Have they come back?" they demanded, with one voice.

"No, no ; they are killed—all killed ! Papa and Fred both—oh, Mrs North, what can I do ? " She dropped sobbing on the floor at Georgia's feet, and buried her face in her dress.

"Perhaps it isn't true," suggested Georgia faintly. She had sunk down again on the bed.

"There's no hope—one man has come back, the only survivor. Both of them at once ! and I was praying for them, and I felt so sure—and even while I was praying they were being killed."

"Is the whole force cut off ? " asked Georgia, almost in a whisper.

"All but this one man." Flora checked her sobs for a moment to answer.

"Fitz Anstruther too ? " cried Mabel sharply.

"All, I tell you ! It doesn't signify to you, Mab ; you have your Eustace left, but I have lost everything. Oh, Mrs North, you know how it feels. Help me to bear it."

"Flora dear," began Georgia, with difficulty. "I—I can't breathe," she gasped, struggling to stand up. "Please ask Mrs Hardy to come. I feel so faint. She will understand."

Rahah, who had been crouched in the corner as usual, sprang up and ran out, returning in a moment with Mrs Hardy, who fell upon both girls immediately, and drove them out with bitter reproaches.

"You pair of selfish, thoughtless chatterboxes ! I should have thought you had more sense, Flora. Just be off, both of you. You can have my rooms for the rest of the night ; I shall stay here. Even if all our poor fellows are killed, is that any reason for killing Mrs North too ? "

“ Oh, please don't, Mrs Hardy ! I never thought —Mrs North is always so kind, and I am so miserable,” sobbed Flora.

“ You shouldn't be miserable unless you're quite certain it's necessary. You wouldn't believe a native who told you he was dead, as they are always doing, so why should you when he says other people are dead ? ” demanded Mrs Hardy, with a brilliancy of logic which somehow failed to satisfy. “ I haven't a doubt that the *bhisti* took to his heels in a panic at the sound of the first shot, and if he hadn't fortunately been in the rear, the panic might have spread to all the rest. There, go away, do, and don't cry so. We'll hope all will go well.”

“ Why have you left your post, doctor ? ” asked Mr Burgrave, meeting Dr Tighe crossing the courtyard.

“ The hospital will have to look after itself a good deal to-night, but I have left the Padri and my Babu in charge there. Mrs North is taken ill.”

“ Good heavens ! It only needed this to make the horror of the situation complete.”

“ From our point of view, it may be the best thing that could happen. It will make the men fight like demons. Here, you girl, where are you going ? ” He had caught the shoulder of a veiled woman who ran up and tried to slip past him into the passage, but she let her *chadar* fall aside, and disclosed herself as Rahah.

“ I have been telling the men of the regiment, sahib, and they have all sworn great oaths that so long as one of them has a spark of life left Sinjāj

Kilin's daughter shall not be without a protector in her need, and that the corpses of foes without and friends within shall be piled as high as the ramparts before the enemy shall gain a footing on the wall. I told also those in the hospital"—there was a hint of malice in Rahah's voice—"and every wounded man who can sit up in bed is crying out for a gun. They will serve as hospital guard, they say, and set Ismail Bakhsh and his men free to fight on the walls."

"Good idea, that!" said Dr Tighe, turning to the Commissioner. "You see how the men take it. Well, I shall keep Mrs North in her own quarters if I can, but there is a passage through to the hospital courtyard, and we must carry her over if it's necessary. But I don't think it will be, now."

Mr Burgrave nodded, and returned to his station on the west curtain. Why the enemy did not advance to the attack was a mystery. In the opinion of Ghulam Rasul and his most experienced subordinates, they had moved out from their position in the town, and were occupying the irrigated land on both sides of the canal in large numbers, sheltered against any volley from the walls by the rows of trees which marked the lines of the water-courses. They could not be seen, nor could it precisely be said that they were heard, but as the old soldiers in the garrison said, it could be felt that they were there. The situation was eerie in the extreme, and Mr Burgrave was unable to find comfort in a phenomenon which made his men cheerful in a moment. It was the Ressaldar who called his attention to it as they stood straining

their ears in the attempt to distinguish some definite sound in the murmuring silence, and at once he himself heard clearly the faint tramp of a galloping horse far away to the north-east.

“He rides!” breathed Ghulam Rasul in an ecstasy, and “He rides!” cried the sowar nearest him, catching up the words from his lips. “He rides!” went from man to man, until the defenders of the towers looked at one another with glistening eyes, and even the unsympathetic Sikhs, who held themselves loftily aloof from the contemptible local superstitions of their Khemi comrades, repeated, with something of enthusiasm, “He rides!” “He rides; all is well,” said Ismail Bakhsh, puffing out his chest with pride, in his temporary guardroom on the clubhouse verandah. “Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib is watching over his house and over his children. The power of the Sarkar stands firm.”

All unconscious of the moral reinforcement which was doubling the strength of the garrison, Mabel and Flora sat disconsolately over the charcoal brazier in Mrs Hardy’s room, listening for the sounds of the attack, which they expected to hear each moment. Mrs Hardy’s vigorous rebuke had nerved them both to put a brave face on matters, and for some time they vied with one another in discovering reasons for refusing to credit the report of the fugitive, and deciding that all might yet be well. But as time went on, and there was no sign of the triumphant return of Colonel Graham and his force, their valiant efforts at cheerfulness flagged perceptibly. Mrs Hardy, running across to say that Georgia was doing pretty well, advised them to lie

down and try to sleep, but they scouted the idea with indignation, and still sat looking gloomily into the glowing embers and listening to the light wind, which wailed round the crazy old buildings in a peculiarly mournful manner.

“Doesn't it seem absurdly incongruous,” said Mabel at last, in a low voice, “that you and I—two *fin de siècle* High School girls, who have taken up all the modern fads just like other people—should be sitting here, expecting every moment that a band of savages will break in and kill us—with swords? It feels so unnatural—so horribly out of drawing.”

“How can you talk such nonsense?” snapped Flora, upon whose nerves the strain of suspense was telling severely. “I never heard that a High School career protected people against a violent death. Do you think it felt natural to the women in the Mutiny to be killed—or the French Revolution, or any time like that?”

“I don't know. It really seems as if they must have been more accustomed to horrors in those days. Just imagine, Flora, the little paragraph there will be in the *South Central Magazine*—‘We regret to record the death of Miss Mabel North, O.S.C., who was murdered in the late rising on the Indian frontier. Miss Flora Graham, a distinguished student of St Scipio's College, St Margaret's, N.B., is believed to have perished on the same sad occasion.’ Your school paper will have just the same sort of thing in it, and the two editors will send each other complimentary copies, and acknowledge the courtesy in the next number. It will all be about you and me—and we shall be dead.”

“Of course we shall; you said that before. But I don’t see what good it does to die many times before our deaths.”

“How horrid of you to call me a coward!” said Mabel pensively.

“I don’t call you anything of the sort. I think you must be fearfully brave to look at things in this detached, artistic kind of way, but what’s the good of it? Death must come when it will come, but naturally no one could be expected to look forward with pleasure to the mere fact of dying. Unless, of course”—Flora’s blue eyes shone as she turned suddenly from the general to the particular—“my dying would save papa or Fred. Then I should be glad to die.”

“You really mean that you wouldn’t mind being killed if somehow it would save either of their lives?”

“Of course I do, just as you would gladly die to save your Eustace.”

“But I wouldn’t!” cried Mabel involuntarily, then tried to minimise the effect of her admission by turning it into a joke. “I think it’s his privilege to do that for me.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say that sort of thing!” said Flora reproachfully. “Happily there’s no one else to hear it, but if I didn’t know you, I should think you were perfectly horrid.”

“No, Flora, really,” cried Mabel, in a burst of honesty; “I can’t say confidently that there is one person in the world I would die for. I feel as if I could die to save Georgia, but I don’t know whether I could do it when the time came. I used to think

that people—English people, at any rate—became heroic just as a matter of course when danger happened, but now I begin to believe that it depends a good deal on what they have been like before.”

“You always try to make the worst of yourself.”

“No, I don’t. I’m trying to look at myself as I really am. I have never in all my life done a thing I didn’t like if I could help it. What sort of preparation is that for being heroic? Flora,” with a sudden change of subject, “suppose the enemy had stormed the fort before this evening, would you have asked your father or Fred to kill you?”

“No,” was the unexpected reply. “It would have been so awfully hard on them. I keep a revolver in this pocket of my coat. You just put it to your eye—and it’s done.”

“Oh, I wish I was like you! I know I should be wondering and worrying whether it was right, and all that sort of thing, until it was too late to do it.”

“I don’t care whether it would be right or not,” said Flora doggedly. “I should do it. Do you think I would make things worse for papa and Fred, or let them have the blame of it if it was wrong?”

“I suppose Eustace would do it for me,” drearily. “He would if he thought it was the proper thing. He always does the proper thing.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk in such a horrid voice. It makes me feel creepy. And I don’t think it’s fair to say that sort of thing about the Commissioner. He’s perfectly devoted to you, and you know it would break his heart to have to—do what we were talking

about. I don't believe you're half as fond of him as he is of you."

"Have you found that out now for the first time?"

"Then it's a shame!" cried Flora. "Why do you let him think you care for him? He worships you, and you pretend——"

"I don't pretend. He took it into his head that I cared for him, and wouldn't let me say I didn't. And he doesn't worship me. He thinks that I shall make a nice adoring sort of worshipper for him when he has got me well in hand."

"Well, I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" said Flora crushingly.

"You needn't be horrid. I'm sure I have quite enough to bear as it is. What with thinking every morning when I wake that I shall have to be pleasant to him whenever he chooses to come and talk to me all day, when I should like to be at the other end of the world——"

"What do you mean to do when you are married?"

Mabel shivered. "I don't know," she said. "I rather hope we shall be killed instead."

"You needn't expect to get out of difficulties in that way. If you want to be killed, you are quite sure not to be. And to go on living a lie——"

"*Don't!*" entreated Mabel. "Whichever way you look at it, it's dreadful. I don't know what to do. What's that? I'm sure I heard a step."

It must have been Mr Burgrave's evil genius which prompted him to present himself at that particular time. The enemy had made no movement, and

the Commissioner thought he might safely leave the wall for a moment, in order to obtain a sight of Mabel, and inquire after Georgia. He entered the room with a creditable assumption of cheerfulness, which the girls did not even observe.

“How are we getting on?” asked Mabel hastily.

“Oh, well, we must hope for the best,” was the unsatisfying answer. In his own mind Mr Burgrave had no doubt that the enemy were only waiting for dawn to make their attack, and would advance on the fort at the same moment that their guns opened fire from the hill.

“No news yet of the forlorn hope?” asked Flora.

“No news,” he answered, then hesitated with his hand on the door, and looked at Mabel. She rose, as if in response to his glance, and went out on the verandah with him.

“Poor little girl!” he said, putting his arm round her. “This waiting-time is very hard upon you, isn’t it? God knows I would give you comfort if I could, but I dare not raise false hopes.”

Mabel freed herself from his clasp. In the dim light cast by the brazier through the small window, he could see that she was very pale, and that her eyes looked unnaturally large and dark in the whiteness of her face. “I want you to take this back, please,” she said, holding out her engagement ring. “I can’t die with a lie upon my soul.”

“A lie!” he exclaimed, in bewilderment.

“I don’t love you. Sometimes I think I almost hate you,” she replied, in a low, monotonous voice.

His natural impulse was to take her in his arms and crush this latest attempt at rebellion by sheer weight

of mingled authority and affection, as he had done more than once before ; but the words died upon his lips as he looked into her face, and he stood irresolute. This was not coquetry, not the wild talk for which he had smiled at her that very evening, but desperate earnest.

“ Am I to take this as your own unbiassed wish, Mabel ? ” he asked slowly, seeing his world fall in ruins around him as he spoke.

“ Absolutely,” she answered.

He took the ring from her hand. “ It is the kind of encouragement that is calculated to nerve a man for the fight, isn't it ? ” he asked. “ But perhaps some bullet will be more merciful than you are.”

He slipped the ring on his little finger, and taking his crutch, left her without another word. When he returned to the rampart it struck him, preoccupied though he was, that the night was not quite so dark as before. Dawn was approaching, and there was a perceptible unrest in the direction of the plane trees behind which the enemy were posted. As he stood looking round Ghulam Rasul approached him from the north curtain.

“ There is a large body of the enemy advancing towards the gate, sahib,” he said. “ They come out of the town, and are marching in perfect silence.”

“ Then they mean to attack us on two sides at once,” said the Commissioner. “ Tell the men in the turrets to reserve their fire until they are close up, Ressaldar. We can't afford to throw away a shot. Are the reserve all under arms ? ”

“All ready, sahib. Your honour can now hear the enemy’s approach.”

They stood waiting and listening. And in that hour of awful expectancy, when armed men were advancing on all sides upon the sorely pressed fort, Georgia’s boy was born.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LUCK OF THE BABA SAHIB.

“WHAT is it, doctor?” cried the Commissioner impatiently, as Dr Tighe ran up the steps towards him at a most unwonted pace.

“It’s a boy—as fine a child as ever I saw in my life—and both likely to do well,” was the gasping response.

“What in the world do you mean by coming and telling me such a thing as that at this moment, sir?” demanded Mr Burgrave, whose habitual calmness was fast vanishing under the strain of the events of the night. “Are you aware that the enemy will probably be inside the fort in a few minutes, and that I am just about to give the order to fire?” He leaned over the sand-bags again to listen to the tramp of advancing feet.

“I tell you, it’ll make all the difference in the world to the men!” cried the doctor. “For heaven’s sake, exhibit some interest, even if you don’t feel it, or they will credit you with ill-wishing the child.”

“Ill-wishing? Nonsense! No one need wish the poor little beggar worse luck than to come into the world at such a peculiarly inopportune moment.”

“Inopportune? Why, he brings good luck with him. Doesn't he, Ressaldar?”

“It is the best of luck, sahib,” answered Ghulam Rasul, with a complacent smile. “Will your honour bear the *salaams* of the regiment to the Memsahib, and entreat her to name an hour when it will be fitting for a deputation representing all ranks to pay their respects to the Baba Sahib?”

“The fellow talks as though we had a lifetime before us!” grumbled the Commissioner morosely. “Surely they are within easy range now, Ressaldar?”

Ghulam Rasul advanced to the parapet, and peered narrowly over the sand-bags which capped it. “I know not how they come on so steadily, sahib,” he said hesitatingly, when he stood erect again. “Perhaps it might be well for your honour——” but he was interrupted by a frantic shout from both gateway turrets at the same moment.

“Hold your fire! Hold your fire! The Colonel Sahib!”

“It is the luck of the Baba Sahib,” said Ghulam Rasul calmly, as Mr Burgrave and the doctor raced one another for the nearest turret. The doctor, not being hampered with a crutch, reached the goal first, and saluted the advancing force with the information that they had just missed being blown into smithereens.

“All well, I hope?” said Colonel Graham, as the guard of the turrets descended tumultuously to unbar the gate.

“All well, Colonel, and the garrison increased by one since you left. And what about the guns, if I may ask?”

“The guns? Oh, they’re at the bottom of the canal,” was the answer that stupefied Dr Tighe, as the forlorn hope began to file through the gateway.

“Then you were successful after all,” inquired the incredulous voice of Mr Burgrave from the steps.

“Oh, I see it! I see it!” cried Dr Tighe, laughing wildly. “You settled the guns, Colonel dear, and then you came home another way, while the enemy are all waiting for you under the hill at this moment! Oh, pat me on the back, somebody, or I’ll die!”

“What’s wrong with you, Tighe?” asked Colonel Graham in astonishment, as the doctor sat down upon a pile of the sand-bags that had been taken away from the gate, and fairly wept.

“If you’d been through what I have to-night, going backwards and forwards between life and death, as I may say, and expecting those fiends to break in any moment—why, you would be glad to find yourself and other people still alive,” was the incoherent reply, as Dr Tighe accepted a sip from the flask which Winlock held out to him. “But I beg your pardon, Colonel Graham and gentlemen, for this exhibition,” he added stiffly, as he rose and smoothed down his coat. “It was the thought that there’s a chance now for Mrs North and the child that bowled me over.”

“The child?” cried Fitz. “Is it a boy, doctor? Oh, good luck! Three cheers for the Luck of Alibad!”

Colonel Graham waved his helmet, and led the cheering with a will, until the rousing sounds echoed beyond the circuit of the fort and revealed to the

startled enemy that their prey had escaped them. In the rage caused by the shock of this discovery they forgot their customary prudence, and leaving their cover, pressed forward to the walls. The troops had been marching all night, but every man hurried to his station without a moment for food or rest, in the conviction that the crisis of the siege had at last arrived. The attack was only half-hearted, however, although the enemy had provided themselves with scaling-ladders, in the evident expectation of being able to push their assault home. The absence of the support upon which they had counted from their cannon on the hill upset their plans, and although Bahram Khan could be seen urging his followers forward even with blows, and setting them the example himself by advancing to the very foot of the wall, they did not so much as succeed in planting one of the ladders. When convinced that the attempt was hopeless, the Prince drew off his forces with considerable skill. A detachment of marksmen posted behind the plane trees made it impossible for the defenders to show themselves at the loopholes, and thus the assailants escaped with but little loss, though it was indubitable that in this, their first attack in force, they had suffered a defeat.

“ Oh, I do feel so perfectly happy ! ” cried Mabel. “ Think of all the horrid, doleful things we were saying last night, Flora. And now Georgie is getting on all right, and the baby——”

“ And such a baby ! ” said Flora gravely, contemplating with deep interest the morsel of humanity which was lying in Mabel’s arms, wrapped in a

shawl. It was with most unflattering reluctance that Mrs Hardy and Rahah had consented to confide their precious charge to two amateur nurses, however well-meaning; but Mabel took a high view of her privileges as an aunt, and the baby had been entrusted to her and Flora for a short time, on condition of their promising faithfully to bring it back if it cried.

“And our men are all safely back, and we have won a victory, and everything is splendid!” Mabel went on. And yet she did not disclose the chief cause of her abounding satisfaction. She was free once more, and she felt that a load had been removed from her mind. But if she told Flora, Flora would think that her plain speaking the night before had brought about this happy result, and ungratefully enough, Mabel did not care that she should think so. “I feel as if I should like to dance,” she broke out. “Do dance, Flora.”

“And shake the dear baby?” asked Flora reproachfully.

“Salaam, Miss Sahib!” said a voice from the doorway, and they turned to see Ismail Bakhsh standing in the semi-darkness of the passage, shaded by the matting curtain. “Is it permitted to the meanest of his slaves to kiss the feet of the Baba Sahib?”

“Oh yes, you can see him,” said Mabel, guessing at the tenor of the request, and she held up the baby. It was not by any means her intention that Ismail Bakhsh should take the child from her arms, but this he did at once.

“Oh, you’ll make him cry!” protested Flora.

“Nay, Miss Sahib, he will know me, that I am the servant of his house. Was I not for ten years Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib’s orderly, going in and out with him?”

“All the same, I don’t quite see how that should make you an authority on babies, my good man,” murmured Flora, and told Mabel Ismail Bakhsh’s qualifications for the post he had usurped. But the baby lay quite quietly in his arms, as though it recognised the force of the ancestral tie.

“The Baba Sahib has the eyes of Nāth Sahib, not of Kīlin Sahib,” was the self-constituted nurse’s next remark, delivered in a tone of keen regret.

“True, but some children’s eyes change colour, just as kittens’ do. Perhaps his will,” suggested Flora, gravely and consolingly.

“Georgia wouldn’t like that,” objected Mabel, when this was translated to her.

“I’m afraid poor Mrs North won’t see much of him, if the regiment have their way,” said Flora. “Do you know what Ismail Bakhsh is saying now?”

“I shall carry the Baba Sahib daily into the air, that he may grow tall and strong,” the old man was announcing. “And as soon as he learns to walk I shall bring a little pony—a very little pony, Miss Sahib”—this in answer to the protest he discerned in Flora’s face—“and I shall teach him to ride without saddle or bridle, that he may be like his grandfather, and I shall instruct him in the use of arms, so that when he joins the regiment with the Empress’s commission he will have no occasion to learn anything. He is to be a soldier from the day of his birth.”

“ Oh, how his father would have loved to teach him to ride ! ” murmured Mabel, with tears in her eyes.

“ The regiment will be his father, Miss Sahib. Is he not the son of Sinjāj Kīlin ? ”

“ No, he isn't ! ” cried Mabel, “ and I don't know why you should persist in leaving out his own father. Have you forgotten him already ? ”

Flora translated the question, and the old man answered it solemnly. “ The Baba Sahib has no father until he has avenged him, Miss Sahib. We shall tell him of all Nāth Sahib's doings, and how he was lured to his death by guile, but he must not take his name upon his lips until he can say, ‘ Now there is not one left alive that had any part in that accursed deed, for I his son have tracked them out and slain them all. ’ ”

“ I don't think Georgia will quite approve of the principles in which the regiment proposes to educate her boy,” said Mabel.

“ Oh,” said Flora, “ he says—‘ the Memsahib is but a woman, though something more than other women. This is our business. Is not the Baba Sahib the seal of the General, left behind to rule us ? ’ You know the story, don't you, Mab ? When General Keeling died the chiefs heard that he had expressed a desire to be buried in England—which was not true, by-the-bye—and they came to say that if his seal was left in Khemistan, they would obey it as if it was himself, so that his body might be buried where he wished. But he is buried in the churchyard here, you know, by his own desire.”

“ May we be allowed to take part in the baby-

worshipping?" asked Fred Haycraft's voice at the end of the verandah. "We couldn't find any servants to announce us, so we were obliged to walk in."

"Poor old Anand Masih is seeking a little rest after the exciting events of the night," laughed Mabel. "Walk softly, please, and come quite to this end of the verandah, so as not to disturb Georgia."

"We felt shy because we couldn't send in our cards properly," said Fitz, who was Haycraft's companion, "but when we saw you had a visitor already, we thought we might venture in. What a nice smart nursemaid Mrs North has set up!—eh, Ismail Bakhsh?"

"True, sahib; I am the Baba Sahib's bearer," responded the old man, with simple dignity. "Every night when I am not on guard I shall bring my mat and lie in the verandah here, to guard his sleep."

"That's a queer idea," said Haycraft. "Has the Memsahib asked you to look after him?"

"Nay, sahib; but many seek to destroy the lion cub, for fear of what he will do when he is full-grown."

"I wonder if there's anything in that," said Fitz. "Can it be that Bahram Khan's men directed their fire purposely upon this courtyard, knowing that Mrs North was here?"

"There are enemies within the walls as well as without, sahib," was the answer, as Ismail Bakhsh rocked the baby gently in his arms.

"I say, I believe I could do that!" said Fitz. "Let me have a try."

"No, no," said Mabel; "you'll only make the baby cry, and hurt his nurse's feelings. We want

you and Mr Haycraft to tell us what really happened last night, and why you left us to endure such agonies of suspense for hours. I believe it was simply that we might think all the more of you when you got back."

"Then I hope you do," said Haycraft, "for he deserves it. Go ahead, Anstruther; you left the fort first. I'll cut in later on, and spare your blushes."

"What in the world are you driving at?" demanded Fitz. "Story? bless you, ladies! I've none to tell. We got across the irrigated land and into the hills just as we had intended, settled ourselves in our *cache*, and then sent up our rockets and opened fire. At first it was exactly like upsetting a beehive, there was such a rushing about and shouting in the camp underneath and all over the town. But we hadn't allowed for one thing. Bahram Khan is far cleverer than we thought him. He could tell by the sound of our firing that we were only a small party, and he guessed at once that our attack was nothing but a feint, arranged to cover a dash on the guns. So he didn't waste any time in trying to rush our position, but simply left us alone, which was truly mortifying, for we had been looking forward to no end of fun among the rocks, leading the fellows off on false scents, and astonishing them with unexpected volleys, and all that sort of thing."

"Fun, indeed!" cried Mabel indignantly. "You ought to be thankful they let you alone."

"I'm sorry, Miss North. I didn't know your heart was so tender towards the enemy. At any rate, they escaped us that time, you see. Well, as soon as

we made sure that the tide of battle was taking its way elsewhere, we evacuated our sangar, and started off at the double for the rendezvous. But there were difficulties in the way of getting there. While we were slipping and sliding down into the valley, making for the canal, we heard tremendous firing in the direction of the bridge, which sent our hearts into our sandals, for we knew that the Colonel's column had no business to be anywhere near there."

"Yes, I cannot make out how you managed to get so far to the right," said Flora, addressing Haycraft, and speaking more in sorrow than in anger, as befits the armchair critic.

"We didn't manage anything of the sort," answered Haycraft. "As a matter of fact, we were not there at all. The only explanation we can suggest for the mysterious fusillade is that the Commissioner and his command were making a record display of wild firing from the walls here—simply blazing away in every direction—and that some of their bullets fell among the enemy posted at the bridge-head, and started them off too. We were marching by compass on the right road when we heard them a good way off, repulsing, as they imagined, an attack in the rear. They can't make out that their shooting is much better than ours, at any rate, for some of their bullets went wide too, and fell into our ranks, which threw the native followers into an awful panic. One or two men got flesh-wounds, that was all, but the doolie-bearers and *bhistis* scattered in a moment, and tried to hide. We had to rout them out of all sort of places, but at last we did think we had found them all, though it seems now that one of them

succeeded in getting away. He is being dealt with—suitably—at this moment.”

“And do you mean to say,” asked Mabel, as Fitz laughed grimly, “that you all went on as if nothing had happened, and never returned the fire?”

“Why, that would have given the whole thing away. Our only chance was to leave them to blaze away at one another, and go straight for the hill. But this is still Anstruther’s innings.”

“Well,” said Fitz, “when we heard the firing we instantly occupied a fine strategic position in a hollow at the base of our cliff, with the canal in front of us, and one of the men and I scouted a little way along the bank. What we found out was very exciting indeed. The men at the bridge-head had discovered their mistake by this time, and ceased firing, but we saw why they were in such an agitated state of mind. The bridge had been repaired, and they were guarding it. More than that, Bahram Khan was even then—as we crouched there—bringing up his men to cross the canal, and invest the water side of the fort, so cutting off our fellows as they came home. I can tell you it was a pretty tough job to wriggle along like a snake, and take advantage of cover, when one wanted simply to tear back to the rest and consult what was to be done. You see, there was just this in our favour. The enemy didn’t know exactly where our men were, and so long as there was no noise on the hill, they would remain in doubt, for they weren’t likely to risk their lives by going up to see. Sure enough, they waited discreetly, spreading themselves out over the irrigated land below the hill on both sides of the

canal. That gave Winlock and me our cue, and when I got to the Colonel——”

“But you haven’t said how you got to him!” cried Mabel and Flora together.

“My turn!” said Haycraft blandly, laying an authoritative hand on Fitz’s shoulder. “Sit and squirm, my boy, while I sing your praises. He swam the canal, ladies, in the dark and icy cold, and took over with him the end of a rope made of the men’s turbans. Winlock and the rest waited to guard the crossing, while this fellow climbed the hill, and by the best of good luck, found us at the top. We had taken the guard round the guns absolutely by surprise—they were all asleep, in fact, without a single sentry—and settled things almost in silence. Not a shot was fired, and everything was so quiet that Woodworth started the bright idea of bringing the guns home with us instead of destroying them. It really seemed quite possible, for the drag-ropes were there ready, and it would have made all the difference in the world to us to have a couple of cannon. But when Anstruther turned up, like a very dripping ghost, and informed us that the way was blocked, and we couldn’t even get home ourselves, much less take back the guns in triumph, things began to look a little blue. We might stay where we were, or we might try to cut our way through, but the prospect wasn’t very cheerful either way.”

“No food or water on the hill, and the enemy holding all the plain below,” summarized Fitz tersely.

“And therefore,” went on Haycraft, “the Colonel lent a willing ear to the aspiring civilian before you,

who offered to lead him right round through the hills and bring him in at the main gate of the fort, the very last place where the enemy would think of expecting him. So the drag-ropes came in useful, after all, for we pulled the guns to a nice steep place overlooking the water. We had to be awfully quiet, of course, though the hill was between us and the enemy, but we spiked the guns and rolled them over into the canal. Then we marched down, and got across by the help of the drag-ropes, which Winlock and his men hauled over with their string of turbans. We got pretty wet about the legs, but nothing to Anstruther. He led us right round, as he had promised, and at the end we actually marched right through the town without meeting a soul. The men were told to break step lest the tramp should be heard ; but the enemy were all ever so far off, watching affectionately for our reappearance on the other side of the canal. They hadn't the slightest suspicion of our real whereabouts. Of course, if we had known which way we were coming back, we might have done a lot of things—taken some dynamite and blown up General Keeling's house, perhaps—but it's no use repining about that now."

"Repining? I should think not!" cried Flora. "You've had a whole night of marching and counter-marching, and strategic movements and capturing guns, and you come home to find a nice little fight waiting for you before you can lie down to sleep, and yet, when you are in the very act of playing Othello to two Desdemonas, you pretend you aren't satisfied!"

"Oh, we haven't made enough of them," said

Mabel briskly. "They think we ought to have met them at the gate, and cast the flowers out of our best hats before them as they marched in. I'm sure this morbid thirst for appreciation oughtn't to be gratified, for their own sakes. Now I am going to take the boy back to his mother. His brains will certainly be addled if Ismail Bakhsh rocks him up and down much longer."

"What's happened to the Commissioner?" asked Haycraft, as Mabel disappeared with the baby. "We rather thought we should find him here."

"I don't know," said Flora. "He hasn't been in this morning. Oh no," as Haycraft lifted his eyebrows, "they haven't quarrelled. They were quite friendly last night. I daresay he's busy."

"It is because of the Baba Sahib that the Kump-sioner Sahib has not come," remarked Ismail Bakhsh calmly, pausing at the corner of the verandah, and addressing no one in particular.

"Our friend understands English too well," muttered Haycraft to Fitz. "But what can he mean—that Burgrave dislikes babies, or that he is jealous because Miss North is so much taken up with it?"

"The Kump-sioner Sahib will not come here in the daytime," was the dark reply. "That is why this unworthy one will keep guard here at night, sahib."

"What maggot has the old fellow got in his brain now?" asked Fitz, when Ismail Bakhsh had disappeared down the passage.

"I really think this valued family retainer is getting a little bit cracked," said Flora. "Do just imagine the Commissioner creeping in here in the dark with a dagger to murder the baby!"

“ Or smothering it with pillows ! ” chuckled Haycraft.

“ Well, I only hope Ismail Bakhsh won't go and shoot some one by mistake, ” said Fitz.

“ There is a deputation from the regiment waiting at the end of the verandah, anxious to interview your son and heir, Mrs North, ” said Dr Tighe in the afternoon of the same day.

“ How nice of them ! I wish I could take him to them myself, ” said Georgia.

“ You must leave that to his proud aunt, ” said Mabel. “ But surely we ought to smarten him up a little, Georgie ? I wish we had a proper robe for him. How would that white embroidered shawl of mine do to wrap him in ? ”

“ No, tell Rahah to get out the shawl which the native officers gave me for a wedding present. It is in the regimental colours, and that will please them more than anything. ”

“ Now, don't excite yourself, ” entreated Mabel. “ You are getting quite flushed over the boy's toilette. Do leave him to us. Surely Mrs Hardy and Rahah and Flora and I can dress one baby between us ? ”

“ Well, mind that if they hold out the hilts of their tulwars, you make him touch them with his hand, and the same if they bring any present. ”

“ Oh, Flora will prompt me. Don't be afraid, Georgie. The boy's first public appearance shall do credit to us all, and the regiment too. ”

But when Mabel stepped out into the verandah, carrying the gorgeous bundle, she was met by Ismail

Bakhsh, who held out his arms with an air of proprietorship which she resented. "No, no!" she said, shaking her head vigorously; "I am going to hold him."

"Nay, Miss Sahib, am I not his bearer? Was I not for ten years orderly to Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib? Have I not served Nāth Sahib and the Mem——?"

"Don't hurt his feelings, Miss North," laughed Dr Tighe.

"Well, he can stand beside me and lift the boy's hand to touch the swords and presents and things. People will really have to understand that he belongs to us as well as the regiment."

The honourable post assigned to him served to mollify Ismail Bakhsh, and he took his stand beside Mabel with immense dignity. The members of the deputation were all in full uniform and advanced to pay their respects strictly in order of rank. All unconsciously, the baby itself struck the right note at the very outset. When Ressaldar Babullah Khan came forward and held up the hilt of his sword, there was no need for Ismail Bakhsh to guide the little hand to it. The glittering metal, rendered dazzling by a ray of light which came through a bullet hole in the curtain, seemed to catch the baby's eye, and the aimless movements of both arms which followed were immediately interpreted as indicating a desire to seize the sword.

"*Shabash! Shabash!*" came in eager accents from the men behind. "He is the true son of Sinjāj Kīlin. The sword will never be out of his hand."

Badullah Khan retired, much gratified, and Ghulam Rasul, taking his place, was careful to hold his sword

where the light fell upon it. Again the baby stretched out its arms to the gleam, and this was accepted as confirming the omen. The rest of the deputation were content when Ismail Bakhsh raised the baby's hand to touch their sword-hilts, and the same was the case with regard to the two or three gold coins which were brought forward as a mark of respect. The bearer of this *nasr* was just retiring when an untoward incident occurred. There was a sudden whirr, and a bullet, piercing the matting curtain, ploughed up the skin of Ismail Bakhsh's wrist and passed through the fleshy part of his arm, before burying itself in the wall behind him. The group in the verandah stood staring at one another. Flora declared afterwards that Mabel dropped the baby in her fright, and that it was only rescued by a frantic effort on the part of Dr Tighe, but Mabel repudiated the accusation with scorn. Certain it is that her nephew was still in her arms the moment after, when a cry of "A hit! a palpable hit!" came from the nearest tower, following closely upon the report of a rifle.

"Are you trying to pot the baby, Winlock?" shouted the doctor, recognising the voice, and stooping under the curtain to step out into the courtyard.

"No, but I've sniped the sniper. There's no cover on Gun Hill now, and I saw his head when he raised it to fire. No harm done, I hope?"

"Well, the Luck of Alibad very nearly came to an abrupt and premature end. Take the child in, Miss North, and reassure the mother. Master North has had his baptism of fire pretty early in life."

"What can have made them fire in this direction

now that we have the curtain?" asked Flora, as she brought out a pair of scissors to slit up Ismail Bakhsh's sleeve.

"I see how it is," cried the doctor. "The curtain doesn't quite reach the ground, and the sight of such an assemblage of spurs, shining in the sun, showed the sniper that something was going on in this neighbourhood. It's a happy thing that Ismail Bakhsh was standing in front of the baby."

"Ah," said the old man, with a delighted grin, "the Baba Sahib is altogether ours now. We have paid our respects at his first durbar, and we have been under fire with him already. Surely the Ressaldar-Major Sahib and those who are absent with him will be mad with envy of us!"

"And you have shed your blood for him," said Dr Tighe, as he bandaged the arm.

"Nay, sahib, it all belongs to him. He has but taken toll."

"Isn't he perfectly sweet, Georgie?" Mabel was demanding at that moment, by way of diverting Georgia's mind from the danger to which the baby had been exposed. Kneeling at the side of the bed, she was trying with conspicuous lack of success, to tempt her nephew to play with her hair. "Don't you think he's the most delightful baby that ever was born?" she asked again.

"Of course," said Georgia, smiling. "I am almost as proud of him as Dr Tighe is, and that's saying a good deal."

"And he's so good," resumed Mabel, referring to the baby, not to the doctor. "He has scarcely

cried a bit, and that is such a comfort under the circumstances. It would have been so discreditable if the Luck of Alibad had cried whenever a shot was fired, but he's a regular little hero."

"Well, he has no lack of nurses, if that's good for the temper," said Georgia. "Oh, how I wish his father could see him!" she sighed suddenly, as the baby moved in her arms and looked straight before it with solemn grey eyes.

"Perhaps he can," suggested Mabel softly.

"Why, Mab! what do you mean?" cried Georgia, her face flushing.

"I only meant that many people think they are allowed to know what is happening on earth," explained Mabel, with some hesitation. Georgia laid her head upon the pillow again with a little moan of disappointment.

"You will talk as if Dick was dead!" she said. "I thought you had heard something—that he was here, perhaps."

"Oh, Georgie!" cried Mabel, in strong remonstrance. Then, remembering that exciting topics ought to be avoided, she changed the subject. "What do you mean to call the boy? Have you decided?"

"St George Keeling," was the unhesitating reply. "Dick has always said that if he had a son he would name him after my father."

"Then you won't call him after Dick? Oh, Georgie!"

Georgia smiled triumphantly. "Oh, yes, I shall insist upon that. If Dick chooses two names, I'm sure I have a right to choose one. Richard St George

Keeling North—it's rather long, isn't it? but Dick won't mind."

"Then I suppose," said Mabel, feeling her way timorously, "that you are not thinking of having him christened just yet? Mr Hardy was asking me whether you would like it to be soon, as things are so uncertain."

"Before his father comes back? Certainly not," said Georgia, with so much decision that Mabel dared make no further protest. She attacked Dr Tighe, however, upon the subject when she saw him next.

"You thought that poor Georgia's delusion would pass away when the baby was born, but she is as fully convinced as ever that Dick is alive," she said, with something of triumph.

"I know," acquiesced the doctor, "and I am disappointed. But the delusion is bound to disappear in course of time—when she sees his grave, if not before. And I'd have you remember, Miss North, that she's likely only hoping against hope now. Her reason may be assuring her that he's dead, while her heart fights against the notion. To try to combat this hope of hers would only make her stick to it all the more. Let it alone, and it will fade away naturally."

Much against her will, Mabel promised to obey. It seemed to her that it was both wrong and cruel to allow such a state of uncertainty to continue; but as the days passed on without any further suggestion that Dick was alive, she began to be satisfied that the delusion was fading from Georgia's mind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ATTEMPT AT DESERTION.

AFTER their disappointment with regard to the guns, the enemy made no further effort to take the fort by storm. They seemed quite content to substitute a blockade for a siege, but this circumstance did not tend to raise the spirits of the garrison, since it showed that there was as yet no sign of any movement for their relief. Sniping was practised indefatigably on both sides whenever opportunity offered, and a stranger standing on the cleared ground between the fort and General Keeling's house might have imagined the one and the other alike deserted, so skilful had the occupants become in taking advantage of cover, save when a puff of smoke and the crack of a rifle on the right met with an immediate response in kind from the left. The enemy were not now occupying the opposite bank of the canal in force, but it was a favourite station for their boldest sharpshooters, who took up their posts under cover of darkness, and from the shelter of rough sangars or dikes of earth, fired at the water-carriers as they clambered up and down to the water-gate with their skins and earthen pots. The great fall in the level of the water gave much encouragement to this form

of attack, and it was found necessary to erect a screen of tent-cloth, supported on poles, to protect the steps cut in the wall below the gate. On the rampart above two or three good marksmen were always posted, watching for the moment at which the sniper was forced to betray his presence for an instant, and the post was much coveted. Any duty that promised a little excitement was eagerly welcomed, for the closeness of their quarters and the lack of exercise were telling upon the health and spirits of the garrison. The wounded did not recover as they ought, and the mortality among the native refugees was very heavy. Moreover, the stock of provisions accumulated under difficulties by Colonel Graham and Dick was diminishing with alarming speed. Rations were served out to all with the strictest economy, and Mabel and Flora, observing a daily diminution in the numbers of the horses stabled in the outer court, refrained heroically from any remark on the shape of the joints set before them. The two girls were quite accustomed to a state of siege by this time, had ceased to start at the whirr and ping of a bullet, and took cover as naturally as the oldest trooper in the regiment when they left the shelter of their rooms. As Mabel said one day to Colonel Graham, the strangest thing was the remembrance that they had ever known a time when the siege was not going on.

“And that you will know a time when it is over, I hope?” he responded. “I only wish I saw any chance of our being relieved, or even of being able to cut our way through, but the next move lies undoubtedly with the enemy.”

This move, when it came, was an unexpected one. In the course of a dark night, a scuffle close under the eastern wall became audible to the sentries, who fired immediately in the direction of the sound, to hear in return a scream which was unmistakably a woman's. The garrison stood to arms, but no attack was made, and no explanation of the mysterious occurrence offered itself. In the morning, however, a white flag appeared in the street next to General Keeling's house, and when Colonel Graham replied to it from one of the gateway turrets, two unarmed men made their appearance, dragging with them a woman, her clothes and veil torn and blood-stained. Having escorted her into the middle of the cleared space, they left her there, and ran back to shelter, while she sank on her knees and raised one hand in an entreaty for mercy. Despite her agony of fear, however, she kept her veil wrapped closely round her.

"Evidently a *pardah* woman," said Colonel Graham to Mr Burgrave, "but what she is doing here I can't make out."

He shouted some words of encouragement, and the woman came a little nearer, and made signs that she desired to be admitted into the fort.

"No, no; can't have that," cried the Colonel. "You must say what you have to say from where you are."

"Nay, sahib," came in a quavering voice, "I am not used to speak before so many men. Thy servant belongs to the household of the Hasrat Ali Begum, and is sent with a message to the doctor lady."

"Tell me your message, by all means, and I will give it her."

“Nay, sahib, suffer thy servant to see her, for I have gone through great perils to bring the message. Last night I crept close up to the walls, hoping to speak with some who might let me in, but the servants of my mistress’s son tracked and seized me, and thy sowars shot at me from the rampart,” and she thrust forth a roughly bandaged foot. “And this morning Syad Bahram Khan said that since I came to bear my mistress’s message, I should now bear his, and tell thee, sahib, what terms he offers thee.”

“And what may they be?”

“He says, sahib—‘The siege has now lasted many days, and my followers are fast becoming discontented and stealing away from me. I have learnt to honour the valour of the sahibs, and but for the rancour of my uncle, the Amir Sahib, I would have made terms with them long before. He has sworn to have the life of every white man in the fort, and it is only because he is now away at Nalapur that I can offer them safety. The fort I must have, to save my face in the sight of my followers; but if it is surrendered to me to-day, before my uncle returns in his cruelty, thirsting for blood, I will send all the sahibs and the women and children away to Rahmat-Ullah, and by nightfall they shall be so far off that there is no pursuing them. The troopers also may go where they will, but I cannot promise them safe-conduct, for I have not beasts to mount them all, and they might chance to be overtaken. These terms I offer out of my honour for the sahibs, and my hatred for the cruelty of my uncle.’”

“And does the Hasrat Ali Begum advise us to accept them?” asked Colonel Graham drily.

“ She has not heard of them, sahib. I have but spoken as I was commanded.”

“ Well, I don't think we need deliberate long over this,” said the Colonel to Mr Burgrave. “ It's clear that Bahram Khan is trying to hedge, and throwing the blame of all that has happened upon his uncle. From that I should judge that the relieving force is in motion at last. When the inevitable attack was made upon us as soon as we were outside the fort, the Amir would get the credit of the massacre, and Bahram Khan would pose as the innocent and peaceable dupe of his uncle's treachery. He might even contrive to wipe out the Amir in his honest wrath, and appear red-handed at Rahmat-Ullah as our avenger—and also as the natural heir to the throne of Nalapur.”

“ You don't leave him many shreds of character,” said the Commissioner stiffly.

“ I forgot he was a friend of yours. No ; but seriously, you wouldn't dream of trusting him ? Of course not. The terms are refused, O servant of the Begum Sahib. Now, what about that message of yours for the doctor lady ? ”

“ It is for her ear alone, sahib.”

“ She is ill, and cannot come to the wall.”

“ Suffer me to see her, sahib, if only for a moment. My mistress bade me inquire of her health, for she has heard rumours that grieve her heart.”

“ I'm sorry it's impossible to admit you. Mrs North is doing well ; you must be satisfied with that.”

“ Nay, but let me see her, sahib. I dare not go back with my mistress's commands undone.”

"It is impossible. Have you any further message?"

"I must see her. It is urgent—most necessary. Sahib, suffer me to come in."

"Impossible. Get back to your own side as fast as you can."

"What could she have had to say?" asked Mr Burgrave curiously, as they left the turret.

"Can't tell. Some native remedy or charm to give her, perhaps—which might have been poison. We have no proof that the woman comes from the Begum. She may be in reality a spy of Bahram Khan's."

The news of the woman's mysterious mission, and her importunity, spread quickly through the fort, but the occupants of the inner courtyard had little time to wonder over it, for Georgia's condition seemed to have taken a sudden turn for the worse. After a troubled night she had waked in an agitated, excited state, unable to bear the slightest noise in the room. She lay listening anxiously, asking the rest at intervals if they did not hear something, and they tried in vain to find out what it was she thought they ought to hear. They left her alone at last, since their presence seemed only to increase the strain upon her mind, and Mabel remained in the outer room with the door ajar. Peeping into the inner room after a time, she saw, to her delight, that her sister-in-law had dropped asleep, but very soon a cry summoned her back. Georgia was sitting up in bed with flushed cheeks.

"He is here, then," she said. "I knew I heard his voice. Bring him in, Mab. How can you keep him outside, when you know he is longing to see me?"

"There's no one outside. What do you mean, Georgie?" asked Mabel, astonished.

"Why, Dick, of course! I have heard him calling me all day, though it sounded so far off, but now it's quite close—in my ear, almost. There, don't you hear?"

Mabel strained her ears, but in vain. "There's nothing, really," she said.

"Oh, you must be deaf! Go and see, Mab. Don't keep him waiting. I know he wants me. Why doesn't some one tell him where I am?"

To satisfy her, Mabel went out into the verandah and looked round, naturally without result. She could scarcely bring herself to return and assure Georgia that the voice was purely a hallucination, but it was a relief to find that she did not seem seriously disappointed. A new idea had come into her mind.

"What was Dr Tighe or some one saying about the Eye-of-the-Begum? that she wanted to see me? She was bringing me a message from him."

"Oh, Georgie!" sighed Mabel, in hopeless despair.

"He wants me. I must go to him. Tell Rahah to get my things ready."

"But you can't get up, you know. Besides, the enemy are all round outside."

"I tell you I must go to him. I wish you wouldn't put absurd obstacles in the way, Mab. He wants me. He is calling me. Of course I shall go."

"Yes, you shall," said poor harassed Mabel; "only lie quiet just now. You can't possibly go to-night, you know. Try to sleep a little."

She succeeded in inducing her to lie down, but whenever she crept in to look at her Georgia was

staring into the darkness with wide-open, brilliant eyes. Not even the baby could divert her thoughts from the conviction that had taken possession of her mind, and Mabel decided to sleep in the outer room, in case her help should be needed during the night. All passed quietly, however, although she had a dream that Rahah came and looked at her very earnestly, even entreatingly, but said nothing. In the morning, after glancing at Georgia, and finding her apparently asleep, she went to her own room to dress. She was just putting the finishing touches to her hair when she saw Rahah come out with a large bundle in one hand and a box in the other, and after looking anxiously around, turn away as if disappointed, and disappear down the passage.

“That looked like Georgie’s travelling medicine-chest. What can she be doing with it?” said Mabel to herself. “And a bundle of clothes— Oh, what——”

A terrible thought had seized her, and she ran along the darkened verandah. The outer room was in a state of wild confusion, as if Rahah had been making a hasty selection from among her mistress’s possessions, and in the inner room Georgia was sitting on the side of the bed, trying to dress.

“Georgie! what are you doing?” gasped Mabel.

“I am going to Dick. He wants me,” answered Georgia, looking at her with unseeing eyes.

“But you can’t move. You’re not fit for it, Georgie, do be sensible.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m perfectly well, only so ridiculously weak. But Dick is calling me, and I am going to him.”

Mabel gazed at her in despair, then seized the baby, which was wrapped up in a shawl, ready for travelling. "You won't go without him, I suppose, and I'll take good care that you don't go with him," she said, while Georgia looked at her without a trace of comprehension in her gaze. "Just sit there until I come back."

She ran down the passage with the baby in her arms, and glanced at the archway in the wall which led to the water-gate. The gate was open, and Ismail Bakhsh was hard at work inflating one of the skins which had been used to support the raft. Rahah was standing near him with her parcels, looking helplessly round, apparently for some one to whom to appeal.

"They have waited until Ismail Bakhsh is on guard, and the sentries on the wall are to look the other way while he ferries them over in turn," said Mabel to herself. "Why, it would kill Georgie! Well, they won't start while I have the boy. Oh," she cried, coming suddenly upon a European, "please tell somebody to go and arrest Ismail Bakhsh. He has got the water-gate open, and he is going to desert."

Long before she had reached the end of her sentence she recognised that it was Mr Burgrave to whom she was speaking. They had scarcely met since the dreadful night of anxiety when she had given him back his ring, and she noticed with a shock how gray and shrunken he looked. It was the hardships of the siege, she tried to assure herself, that had made him old before his time.

"I will certainly give your message to the officer

on guard," he answered politely. "We can't allow this sort of thing to begin."

He went on his way with a bow, and she stood looking after him. Hearing a click, she glanced up hastily. The sentry on the rampart above her was kneeling down and taking deliberate aim with his carbine at the unconscious Commissioner. She knew the man; he was Ismail Bakhsh's son Ibrahim, and she saw that the moment Mr Burgrave quitted the shelter of the wall in crossing the courtyard he would be at his mercy. But in her arms was a talisman, and she ran forward and caught up the Commissioner, who looked round at her in astonishment.

"Oh, do take him in your arms for a moment!" she cried, stammering in her eagerness. "You have never held him, and his mother will be so pleased."

Taken completely by surprise, Mr Burgrave allowed the baby to be placed in his arms, and actually carried it across the court, while Mabel, at his side, was shaking with apprehension. She knew that he was safe while he held that precious bundle, but she was by no means sure that Ibrahim would not resent her interference with his plans to the extent of shooting her instead. This physical terror kept her from feeling the awkwardness of the situation, and she did not even realise it until Mr Burgrave paused at the archway leading into the outer court, and looked into her face as he gave her back the baby.

"You will laugh at me for saying that I had a little hope left until to-day," he said. "Now I see how foolish I was. In spite of the siege and all your troubles, you look now as you did when I first knew

you, and it is simply because you are free from me. Don't be afraid; I shall not persecute you. All I care for is to see you happy in your own way."

There was little inclination to laughter in Mabel's mind as she returned slowly to Georgia's room. She had scarcely reached it before Rahah came flying along the passage to tell her mistress that Woodworth Sahib and ten men had come and taken Ismail Bakhsh prisoner, and there was therefore no hope of escaping to-day. Georgia hardly seemed to hear. She was still sitting where Mabel had left her, sobbing feebly and too weak to move, and they were able to get her into bed again before Dr Tighe came bustling in.

"Now, now, what's this I hear?" he asked severely. "Will you think, Mrs North, that we've always regarded you as a sensible woman, and that the Major was proud of your judgment? You wouldn't be in earnest just now?"

"Oh, let me go!" implored Georgia. "I can't hear what you say, Doctor. Dick's voice comes in between. He wants me so much. Oh, Dick, I would come, but they won't let me."

"This won't do," said Dr Tighe. "Must humour her, poor thing!" he muttered behind his hand to Mabel. "Now, Mrs North, assuming that the Major is delirious, and crying out for you——"

"Torture!" interjected Georgia, in a high, hard voice.

"No, no! Nonsense, nonsense! Why, it's biting out his tongue he'd be before the devils would get a word out of him. But supposing he's ill, now——would it be any pleasure to him to know that

you had killed yourself and the child trying to get to him? You know it wouldn't. 'Twould be a bitter grief to him all his days. And for that reason you'll take this, and lie down quietly, and try to get some sleep."

"It won't drown his voice," said Georgia, accepting the medicine, but looking up with such misery in her eyes that it almost destroyed the doctor's self-control. "I should hear that if I were dead."

"Oh, Doctor," murmured Mabel, drawing him into the outer room, "if she should be right, after all! What can we do?"

He looked at her in astonishment. "My dear Miss North, you mustn't let yourself be led away by that poor soul's ravings. After such a happy married life as hers, it would be strange indeed if she could give her husband up for lost without a struggle. But what possible hope is there of his being alive? If he was a prisoner, don't you think Bahram Khan would have made use of him long ago to torment us? Don't make it worse for her by encouraging her to hope."

"No, no, of course not," said Mabel impatiently. "But all the same," she muttered to herself as he left her, "something ought to be done, and I know the man to do it."

Half-an-hour later she went out into the verandah to meet Fitz Anstruther, who had come as usual to inquire after Georgia and the baby, and beckoned him to a secluded corner, where two packing-cases served as seats.

"Do you know," she said eagerly, without giving him time to speak, "I am beginning to believe that

Dick is really alive. Georgia is so absolutely convinced he isn't dead, and I can't think she is altogether mistaken. Is there no way of finding out?"

"You don't mean by making inquiries, surely? The Amir certainly believes he is dead, and Bahram Khan chooses us to think that he does too, so we should get no good out of them."

"Yes, I quite see that, but what I have been thinking is that some one to whom he had been kind may have hidden him away—in a house in the mountains, or one of the camps of the wandering tribes—and he may be lying there ill all this time."

"I only wish he might, but in that case I'm afraid it would simply be his death-warrant if we found out where he was. Bahram Khan would still be between us and him, you see."

"Yes, but there's another chance still. Suppose he is in Bahram Khan's hands, after all, but too badly wounded to be moved? Bahram Khan would know that he could not make use of him without showing him, and that he would be no good to him dead. So what if he is keeping him prisoner just with that in view—to produce him when he gets better, and offer to give him up if we surrender the fort? Yes, the more I think it over, the more I feel certain that it must be that."

"And what then?" asked Fitz, as she paused eagerly.

"Why then, don't you see, if we once knew that he was a prisoner, and where he was kept, a force could go out and rescue him, as they did the guns. There isn't a man that would not volunteer, and then he would be saved."

“But how are we to find out whether he is a prisoner?”

“Oh, surely you must know! Don’t pretend to be so stupid. Some one must go and see—dress up as a native, and get into the enemy’s camp.”

He laughed. “Curiously enough, the Colonel was talking of something of the kind this very morning. He wants to know whether there is really a rumour among the enemy about a relieving force.”

“And who is to go?”

“Who? Oh, I think that old *daffadar* of Haycraft’s, Sultan Jān, was the man pitched upon at last. He is the foxiest old beggar alive, and less known about here than most of our fellows.”

“Only Sultan Jān?” in deep disappointment. “But you are dark—you know the language so well—you are such a good scout—you are going?”

“I, Miss North? Why in the world——”

“To find Dick, because you and he are such friends—because I ask you.”

“I am very much honoured, but surely the Commissioner is the natural person——”

“The Commissioner would be too lame to go,” cried Mabel, in confusion, “and even if he wasn’t, I couldn’t ask him.” Fitz’s look of surprise, less for the fact than for her mention of it, reminded her that her words must sound strangely in his ears. “Perhaps I ought to explain,” she stammered. “I—I am not engaged to Mr Burgrave now.”

“Oh, indeed?” said Fitz slowly, readjusting his ideas as he spoke. Only the night before he had heard Haycraft say to Flora that the Commissioner and Miss North must have quarrelled, for they had

not spoken for days, and she was not wearing his ring. Certain hopes of Fitz's own had sprung up anew at that moment, only to be dashed to earth again by Flora's confident assurance that the estrangement could be only a temporary one. She was certain that the engagement was not broken off, or Mabel would have told her. Now, however, it appeared that Flora had been mistaken.

Fitz drew a deep breath. "You want me to go in disguise and make inquiries about your brother, because you ask me? Not so very long ago we were discussing a certain subject, and I agreed not to mention it again without your permission. If I go, will you give me that permission?"

Mabel recoiled from him, aghast. "You are trying to drive a bargain with me for Dick's life?" she cried, in horror. "I should never have believed it of you."

"Oh, I am only looking at the matter in a business light. If I do your work, I should like to be sure of my wages."

"How can you talk in such a horrid mercenary way? It's mean, ungentlemanly, of you to try to entrap me like this! I could not have imagined——"

"Please let us be businesslike. Only, believe me, I had no idea of setting a trap."

"Do you mean to say that if I refuse to let you speak to me again you won't go?"

"That is not the question, allow me to remark. I ask you whether, if I go, I may enter upon the forbidden subject when I come back?"

"I believe you are going whether I say Yes or No." She looked at him sharply, but he did not

change countenance in the least. "Why should you take it into your head to spoil a thing that ought to be so splendid, by tacking on an odious condition to it?"

"I am afraid you won't find it easy to move me either by hard words or soft ones. Is it a bargain?"

"If you mean that I am to promise to marry you if you go——" cried Mabel, her eyes blazing.

"I mean nothing of the kind. That is not in the bond. If I have such a curious fancy for being rejected by you that I am willing to accept another refusal as the price of my services on this occasion, don't you think you are getting off rather cheap on the whole?"

Mabel laughed shamefacedly. "I believe you have only been trying to tease me all along," she said. "Very well; it is a bargain, then."

"There's something rather mysterious about this attempt to desert on the part of Mrs North's servant," said Colonel Graham to the Commissioner. "The men seem to feel strongly on the subject, but I can't get any of them to speak out. I am not sure that it's a case for a court-martial, and if you would join me in an informal inquiry into the affair, it might prevent bad feeling."

"With pleasure. But I don't quite see where the civil power comes in, in a matter of this kind. Is it that the man's status is really that of a civilian?"

"He is a volunteer, of course"—Colonel Graham ignored the veiled reference to what Mr Burgrave still considered his usurpation of authority—"but

as an old soldier, they all acknowledge that he is amenable to military discipline. What I can't make out is the notion which seems to prevail that you have something to do with the matter, and that's why I should like your assistance in inquiring into it."

"You don't imagine that I incite your volunteers to desert, I hope?" said the Commissioner drily, taking his seat beside Colonel Graham, to await the arrival of the prisoner.

"If I could think so, the mystery would be cleared up. As it is—" the Colonel broke off suddenly, on the entrance of the prisoner with his guards. He signed to the two sowars to retire out of earshot, and addressed their charge. "I have sent for you privately because I hope that things are less black than they look against you, Ismail Bakhsh. That a man with your record should be detected in the act of deserting to the enemy seems preposterous, and I hope you may be able to show that your idea was to obtain information of some kind. In that case your conduct might be passed over for once, as imprudent but not disgraceful."

"I have nothing to say, sahib. I had my orders."

"Orders from Bahram Khan? Don't trifle with me, Ismail Bakhsh. Am I to give Mrs North the pain of knowing that her father's orderly has been shot as a traitor?"

The old man drew himself up. "Since I shall no longer be present to protect the Memsahib and her son, I will tell thee the truth, sahib, that thou mayest watch over them in my stead. My orders were from the Memsahib herself."

“ Mrs North told you to desert ? ” cried the Colonel incredulously.

“ The Memsahib bade me be ready to convey her and her son and her waiting-woman out of the fort at such an hour, and I obeyed her.”

“ Oh, come, this is too much ! Why should Mrs North wish to leave the fort ? ”

Ismail Bakhsh cast a fierce glance at Mr Burgrave, who had taken no part in the examination. “ I can guess the reason, sahib, but it is not expedient to accuse the great ones of the earth to their faces.”

“ Now what did I tell you ? ” asked Colonel Graham of the Commissioner. “ I said you were mixed up in it somehow. You would like to have the matter cleared up, of course ? ”

“ By all means,” said Mr Burgrave indifferently. The proceedings bored him, and he did not see why both the Colonel and Ismail Bakhsh should persist in bringing his name into them.

“ Speak, and fear not,” said the Colonel.

“ Thus then it is, sahib. When the Kumpsioner Sahib came to the border, he found the name of Sinjāj Kīlin in all men’s mouths, and he hated it, and sought to throw dirt upon it, even as an upstart king seeks to defile the monuments of those that were before him. But there were yet living in the land Sinjāj Kīlin’s daughter and her husband, Nāth Sahib, to keep his name in remembrance, and therefore the Kumpsioner Sahib hated them also. His eye was evil against Nāth Sahib, insomuch that he blackened his face in the presence of the tribes and of the Amir of Nalapur. Then, because that was not sufficient, he suborned Bahram Khan to murder

him"—the Commissioner, looking bored no longer, tried to interpose a protest, but Ismail Bakhsh disregarded it contemptuously—"and he thought all his enemies were removed, since there was only a woman left of the whole house of Sinjāj Kīlin. But when the Memsahib's son was born, the Kumpsioner Sahib, remembering the evil deed he had done, feared lest the boy should grow up to avenge his father. The Ressaldar Ghulam Rasul can tell of the wrath and fear with which he heard of the child's birth, and I myself have watched every night in the Memsahib's verandah with my weapons, so that no harm should come to the Baba Sahib. And seeing that the Kumpsioner Sahib could not even dissemble his enmity so far as to come and take the child in his arms like the other sahibs, and send messages of good luck to the mother by the Miss Sahibs, I thought at least that he would fight with steel and not with drugs. But the Memsahib knew him better than I, and when this morning I received her order to help her to escape with the child, I knew that she thought it safer to take refuge with the Amir Sahib than to remain in this place. And now they will kill me; but the charge of Sinjāj Kīlin's son is thine, sahib," addressing the Colonel, "since the truth has been fully made known to thee by my mouth. For what says the proverb? 'When the base-born mounts the throne, it is ill to be a king's son.' Guard well the Baba Sahib, for the sake of Nāth Sahib, thy friend. And as for the Kumpsioner Sahib, let him know that the men of the regiment have sworn by the holy Kaaba and the sacred well, and by the head of the Prophet of

God, that he shall not escape. Once he has succeeded in slaying the Baba Sahib, no land shall be distant enough to afford him a refuge. Each man will hand down to his children the duty of slaying him, and his sons and brothers and nephews, and all his house, even as he has set himself to destroy the house of Sinjāj Kīlin."

"Good heavens!" said the Commissioner, passing his hand feebly over his damp brow, "do they actually suspect me of plotting to murder a woman and child—and of putting poor North out of the way?"

"Suspect is not the word," replied Colonel Graham, rather cruelly; "they are absolutely convinced of it."

"This is one of the things that have to be lived down, I suppose. Well, the offence of our friend here seems to be a matter relating to me personally. Will you kindly release him as a favour to me? I think also it might be as well to let him do perpetual sentry-go in the verandah he seems to affect so much—take up his quarters there, in fact, and protect the baby from my machinations. And tell him that he is welcome to use his weapons on me if he catches me there under suspicious circumstances."

"Are you inviting him to murder you?" demanded the Colonel.

"He doesn't seem to need much invitation. But no amount of protestations will disabuse him of his theory, and it would be a pity to deprive Mrs North of such an attached servant. If you point out that last fact to him, it may give me a few years longer to live."

It was with deepening surprise and bewilderment that Ismail Bakhsh heard his sentence, which was delivered in terms of considerable pungency by Colonel Graham. Imprisonment or hard labour would have seemed natural enough, death he had confidently expected ; but what did his release mean ? The Colonel's indignant vindication of Mr Burgrave affected him not a whit ; but that the man he had accused betrayed neither guilt nor fear did cost him some searchings of heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN IMPOTENT CONCLUSION.

MABEL was not far wrong in guessing that before she spoke to Fitz it had been decided he should take part in Daffadar Sultan Jān's reconnaissance. Colonel Graham's choice had fallen upon him less on account of any merits he possessed than of his personal appearance. It could not be said that he outshone the other men in coolness or courage, and in knowledge of the surrounding country Winlock, at any rate, was his equal, but the determining point in his favour was the fact which his friends, dancing with rage the while, were forced to acknowledge, that he made up detestably well as a native. From his Irish mother he had inherited the Spanish type of colouring often found in Connaught and western Munster, large dark eyes, black hair, and a skin so smooth and sallow that very little assistance from art was needed to assimilate it to the comparatively light tint prevailing among the frontier tribes. There were difficulties at first with Sultan Jān, who had once saved Haycraft's life in a border skirmish, and had constituted himself a kind of nursing father to him ever since. He rejected with scorn the idea of taking any but his

own particular sahib with him on his perilous journey, until it was pointed out to him that this would almost certainly involve the death of both. Haycraft's fair hair, grey eyes, and sun-reddened complexion made it impossible to disguise him satisfactorily, and the old man yielded the point, ungraciously enough, when he had seen Fitz in native dress.

A noted freebooter in his unregenerate days, Sultan Jān had never found it easy to submit his own will to that of his military superiors. Belonging to a powerful tribe across the border, he had been the terror of the outlying British districts, until one of General Keeling's lieutenants induced him first to come in to a conference, and then to join the regiment. His independent habits operated to prevent him from rising to any higher rank than that of daffadar, but he was a power in his troop, which was now largely composed of his nephews and cousins of many varying degrees. Haycraft would say sometimes that he was entirely devoid of the moral sense, and that his regard for the honour of the regiment was not wholly to be depended upon as a substitute, but as no one knew exactly what this condemnation implied, Haycraft's brother-officers generally put it down to liver. One thing was certain, that Sultan Jān's faithfulness to his salt was above suspicion, since he had on occasion assisted in inflicting punishment upon his own tribe for various raids, and there were special reasons for anticipating his success in the adventure he was undertaking. The scheme, indeed, had been entirely modified in accordance with his views, since Colonel Graham's

first intention had been that his messenger should turn southwards, and cross the desert into the settled territory. Sultan Jān recommended a dash for Fort Rahmat-Ullah instead, pointing out that if he and his companion chose a dark night for their start, they might swim down the canal for a considerable distance, supporting themselves on inflated skins. When beyond the enemy's farthest outposts, they could strike across the desert to the north until they reached the mountains, with every pass and track of which he was familiar. By certain little-known paths they could then make their way to Rahmat-Ullah, where there would be the chance of discovering what was going on in the outside world, as well as of representing the hard plight of the defenders of Alibad. In returning they might, if opportunity offered, acquaint themselves with the enemy's dispositions nearer home.

The hour, and even the night, appointed for the start, were kept a profound secret from all but those immediately concerned, lest information should in any way be conveyed to the enemy, and it was not until a whole day had passed without a visit from Fitz, that the dwellers in the Memsahibs' courtyard made up their minds that he was actually gone. Mabel, sitting in the safest of the four verandahs, with the baby in her arms, looked up anxiously when Flora came to tell her that Fred Haycraft admitted they were right in their surmise.

"Oh, poor Mr Anstruther!" she said. "I do hope he won't get hurt. I should feel so dreadfully guilty if anything happened to him."

"You needn't, then," said Flora bluntly, as Mabel

stopped short, remembering that she had not intended to make public her compact with Fitz. "His going has nothing whatever to do with you. He was chosen as the most suitable man all round, that's all. Fred said so."

This was hardly to be borne. "I didn't mean to tell you," said Mabel, with dignity, "but I asked him to go, that he might make inquiries about Dick."

"Oh!" cried Flora, suddenly enlightened; "then Fred was right after all, and you have broken off your engagement. I never would have believed——"

"I really don't see why you should jump to a conclusion in that way."

"Why, because you couldn't very well be engaged to two people at once."

"I am not engaged to anybody," very haughtily.

"Not to Mr Anstruther?"

"Certainly not."

"And yet you make him run this awful risk for the sake of your brother? Oh, nonsense! he knows he will get his reward when he comes back."

"You don't seem to understand," coldly, "that some men are willing to do things without hope of reward. Since I have told you so much, I may as well say that if Mr Anstruther chooses to ask me to marry him when he comes back, he will do it knowing that I shall refuse him again."

"Again?" cried Flora. "Would you like to know what I think of you? Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't, but I am going to tell you. If you happened to be plain—but no, if you were a plain woman,

you wouldn't find men to do this sort of thing for you—if you were any one but Queen Mab, people would say you were absolutely *mean*! It's simply and solely the celebrated smile that makes you able to do these horrid things, and you presume upon it."

"Oh, don't, please!" entreated Mabel. "That's Dick's word."

The tables were turned, and Flora became the criminal instead of the avenger of justice. She had seized upon one of Mabel's dearest memories with which to taunt her, and she was silent for very shame. It tended to deepen her remorse that Mabel betrayed no anger, only a gentle forbearance that cut the accuser to the quick.

"You don't understand," she said sadly, "and I don't know that I understand it myself. You wouldn't wish me to marry Fitz Anstruther if I don't care for him, would you? and he wouldn't wish it either. But could I lose a chance of saving Dick because of that? It's not as if I had pretended to give him any hope. I spoke perfectly plainly, and he quite sees how it is."

"But you must care for him a little," broke out Flora, "when he is willing to do such a thing for you without any reward. Oh, you do, don't you?"

"No," said Mabel slowly, "I'm sure I don't. If I did, I couldn't have let him go."

"Oh yes," cried Flora hopefully, "for Mrs North's sake, and your brother's, you could give him up."

Mabel shook her head. "I like him very much," she said, "but I don't want to marry him."

"Now that's what I say is being mean!" cried Flora. "You get all you want out of him, and offer

him nothing in return, because he is generous enough to work without payment. He has made himself too cheap."

"Well, I am very sorry, but I don't see how I can help it. If I want things done, and he is willing to do them on my conditions, would you have me refuse?"

"Did your Browning studies with the Commissioner ever take you as far as the story of the lady and the glove?" asked Flora suddenly. "The knight fetched her glove out of the lions' den, you know, and then threw it in her face. Mr Anstruther would never do anything so rude, but I should really love to advise him to try how you would feel towards him after a little wholesome neglect."

"Mr Anstruther is a gentleman," said Mabel, growing red.

"And you trade upon that too! Oh, Mab, you don't deserve to have a nice man in love with you. It would serve you right if a William the Conqueror sort of person came and urged his suit with a horse-whip."

"You are so absurd, Flora. I do wish you wouldn't bother. I don't want to marry any one, if you would only believe it. I'm quite satisfied as I am," and Mabel rose with a flushed face, and carried the baby indoors.

That day and the next passed without any news of the adventurers, but on the second night after their departure the sentries on the south rampart were startled by a hail which seemed to come from the canal. The moon had long set, and nothing could

be distinguished in the misty darkness, but again the cry came, weak and quavering, as if uttered by a man all but exhausted. The listening sowars grew pale, and whispered fearfully that the murdered irrigation officer, Western, whose body had been thrown by the enemy into the canal at the beginning of the siege, was claiming the funeral rites of which he had been deprived. The whisper soon reached the ears of Woodworth, who was on duty, and rating the men heartily for their superstition, he went down at once to the water-gate. Here, clinging to the poles which sustained the canvas screen placed to protect the water-carriers, they found Fitz, barely able to speak, supporting Sultan Jān's head on his shoulder. The old man, who was covered with wounds, and almost insensible, was partially upheld by the inflated skin to which he was tied, but his helplessness had obliged Fitz to propel the skin before him as he swam. It was with the greatest difficulty that the many willing helpers succeeded in bringing the two men, one almost as powerless as the other, up the steps and in at the gate, and when they were safely inside, both were carried at once to the hospital and delivered over to the care of Dr Tighe. The news of their return spread through the fort as soon as it was light, but it was not until the evening, when Haycraft came into the inner courtyard after a visit to the hospital, that the ladies learned anything of the adventures they had met with.

"I haven't seen much of Anstruther," he said, in answer to the eager questions which greeted him. "He was only allowed to talk for a few minutes,

and of course the Colonel had to hear all he could tell, but I have a message for you, Miss North. He could not discover anything to justify Mrs North in believing that the Major is still alive. The few men to whom he ventured to put a question were positive that neither Bahram Khan nor the Amir have any white prisoners, and he believes they were speaking the truth."

"Oh dear! I was so hoping—" sighed Mabel. "But of course he could not help it."

"Help it? Scarcely. He has done wonders as it is. I have just been hearing all about it from Sultan Jān, who was frantic lest he should die before he could tell his story. The doctor said it would do the old fellow less harm to talk than to lie there fuming, so I listened to the whole thing, and took notes, just to satisfy him."

"Oh, do tell us what they did," cried Mabel and Flora together.

"Well, things seem to have panned out all right just at first. They got past the enemy's outposts, and swam a good bit further before they thought it safe to take to dry land. When they had let the air out of their skins, they hid them on the opposite bank of the canal, so as to throw any one who found them off the scent, and swam over. They managed to get across the desert before it was light, so that they were not seen, but in the mountains, where they expected to find everything easy, their troubles began. They were scouting awfully carefully, and yet they all but dropped into a pleasant little party of Sultan Jān's own tribesmen."

"But why was that a trouble?" interrupted

Flora. "I should have thought it was the best thing that could happen to them."

"Flora is just a little bit apt to jump at conclusions," said Haycraft, in a stage aside to Mabel, dodging dexterously the palm-leaf fan which Flora threw at him. "If she would just consider that Sultan Jān's tribe are fighting for Bahram Khan, she would see that family relations might possibly be a little strained if they met. Well, nearly the whole day our two fellows dodged about among the hills, trying to find a path left unguarded, but there wasn't one. You see, the tribe know the locality as well as Sultan Jān does, and they have picketed all the passes for the benefit of any traders who may come by. So at night our men slipped down into the desert again, and struck out for Rahmat-Ullah by that route. But the level ground was dangerous too, owing to a few other bodies of Bahram Khan's adherents, who don't dare dispute the mountain paths with the hillmen, but keep their eyes open for anything that may come their way. After avoiding two or three lots of them with difficulty, Sultan Jān suggested taking a short rest in a cave that he knew of, and going on again when the moon set. Unfortunately, the cave had also occurred to other people as a nice place for a night's lodging, and before they had been asleep very long, they were waked by the arrival of a whole party of belated travellers, some of the very fellows they had escaped just before. Why, Miss North——"

"No, no, it's nothing. Please go on," said Mabel, who had shivered violently.

"Old Sultan Jān had all his wits about him, and

cried out at once that he and his son had quarrelled with their tribe, and were coming to Alibad to take service with Bahram Khan. The other men cross-questioned them a good deal, but finding nothing suspicious in their answers, agreed to take them on with them to Alibad in the morning. Of course it was a blow not being able to go on to Rahmat-Ullah, but they didn't mind that so much when they found out from their new friends that the people there are practically as much besieged as we are. The tribes have given up attempting to rush the place, but they hold the passes, and it's impossible for the fellows in the fort to force them until there's a relieving column ready to co-operate at the other end. "

"But what about the relieving column?" broke in Flora. "Is it never coming?"

"In the course of a few centuries, I suppose. There seems to be the usual transport difficulty, to judge by the way the tribesmen are chortling over the loss of time. Of course Anstruther and Sultan Jān made good use of their ears, and learned all they could without asking suspicious questions. In the morning they started off with their fellow-lodgers in this direction, and I must say I don't envy their feelings. If they had happened to meet one of Sultan Jān's tribe, it would have been all up. However, the rotten discipline of Bahram Khan's lot stood them in good stead. It seems that the permanent investing force here consists only of his personal hangers-on and a detachment from the Nalapur army, which the Amir has made as small as he dares, and would like to recall altogether. All the

rest—the tribesmen and robber bands—start off whenever they like to raid along the frontier, just leaving representatives in the town to see how things go, so as to make sure of not missing their share in the loot when this place falls. There's one good thing—they'll have established such a sweet reputation among the country-people that we shan't have much trouble in hunting them down when the rising is over."

"Aren't you counting your chickens a little too soon?" asked Mabel, with a rather strained smile. "And we are forgetting——"

"Our two fellows? So we are. I'm an awful chap for wandering away from the point. Well, they found Bahram Khan established in the court-house, which was in a horrible state of squalor, overlaid with a little cheap magnificence. He received them with every appearance of friendliness, though they were certain he suspected them. They had nothing to go upon, for he treated them royally, and promised them both posts in his bodyguard, but they felt sure there was something wrong. They expected to be denounced every minute, but he was too wily for that. Before letting them go to their quarters at night, he informed them confidentially that he had just finished constructing a mine reaching from General Keeling's house to our east curtain, and that it was to be exploded the next day. They should form part of the storming-party, and have the honour of leading. Of course they pretended to accept with tremendous delight, but he had got them in an awful fix. There was just the one hope that the mine did not really exist at all, but when they asked the

rest about it, they were shown the entrance, though they were not allowed to go down into it, because of the explosives put ready there, the fellows said. I think myself, and so does Runcorn, that the soil is much too light for them to be able to dig such a length of tunnel without its falling in, and that we must have heard them at work if they had got as near as they make out, but of course Anstruther dared not trust to the chance. He didn't venture to speak to Sultan Jān, but they managed to give each other a look which meant that they must get away and warn us. Of course that was just what Bahram Khan had been counting upon, and they found that their quarters for the night were in the stables belonging to the court-house, where all their new comrades slept. There were sentries in the yard in front, which looked as if something was expected to happen. Anstruther and Sultan Jān had one of the stalls to themselves, and as soon as ever the rest seemed to be asleep, they set to work to dig through the wall with their daggers, one working, and the other lying so as to screen him from the sentry, or any one else who might look in. Just before they broke through, it struck them to ask one another what was on the other side. They knew there was a lane at the back of the stables, but would they come out into the full moonlight or the shadow, and was there another sentry there? After listening carefully, they settled that there wasn't a sentry, but they couldn't decide upon the moonlight, so they had to chance it. While Sultan Jān dug away the mud bricks, Anstruther was heaping up the straw they had been lying upon to hide the hole, and

arranging their *poshteens* * to look as if they were still there. Happily, when they got through, they were on the dark side of the lane. They crept out, and built up the hole again as well as they could from the outside. It was awfully nervous work, for a patrol might come along at any minute, but at last they were able to be off. They wriggled along in the shadow, and Sultan Jān led the way towards the east side of the town. Of course it was a fearful round, but they couldn't risk passing the enemy's headquarters again. The moon bothered them horribly, for they knew that until it set there was no hope of passing the outpost at the old go-downs on the bank, even if they got to the canal safely. They reached the desert all right through the by-lanes, and made tracks for the point at which they had landed two nights before, but to get to it they had to pass the house of one of the Hindu canal-officials, who seems to have been left in possession in return for doing some sort of dirty work for Bahram Khan. There was a dog which made a row, and the Hindu came out and caught them. Sultan Jān wanted to kill him, but Anstruther wouldn't hear of it, so they asked for a night's lodging in one of the out-buildings, intending, of course, to slip away as soon as he was gone to bed again. But he insisted on bringing out food, and sat up talking to them, while they were agonising to get rid of him. And all the time he must have sent some one to the town to give the alarm, for suddenly he changed countenance and got confused as he talked, and they looked at the door, and there were Bahram Khan's men.

* Sheepskin-lined coats.

In a moment they were in the thick of a tremendous rough-and-tumble fight. There was no room inside the hut to use rifles, but both sides had daggers, and the enemy tulwars. Anstruther says he fought mostly with his fists, and the enemy seemed to think that wasn't fair, for pretty soon they began to give him a wide berth. Just as he got out of the scrimmage, Sultan Jān went down, and in falling knocked over the lamp and put it out. The enemy devoted their attention to one another for some little time before they saw what had happened, and then they started to find Anstruther. He was standing up, perfectly quiet, against the side of the hut, and he says it nearly turned his brain to hear the fellows feeling for him in the dark, while he knew that his only hope was not to move. They didn't find him—actually! but they found the Hindu instead. He had been hiding in a corner in an awful fright, and they killed him, and having accounted for two, thought they had done their business. They didn't stop to mutilate the bodies, apparently because there was a false alarm in the town just then. You know one of our men let off his rifle by mistake last night, and we noticed that the enemy seemed a good deal disturbed. Well, there was Anstruther left in the hut, with what he believed to be Sultan Jān's dead body. And this is what the old man can't get over—he wouldn't leave him to be cut up by those swine, but dragged him down to the canal, and when he had fetched over one of the skins and blown it out, tied him on to it, and started to swim up here. But as soon as the cold water touched Sultan Jān's wounds, he revived, and was able to put one arm

round Anstruther's neck, and so make it a little easier for him. But it was tremendous—simply tremendous, and if ever any man deserved the V.C., Anstruther does, though of course he won't get it, being merely a poor wretch of a civilian."

"Why, Mab!" cried Flora, for Mabel had risen suddenly. Her eyes were dilated and her cheeks flushed, and she looked more beautiful than the others had ever seen her. They almost expected her to break out into an impassioned eulogy of Fitz's achievement, but the sight of their astonishment seemed to recall her to herself, and she faltered and grew crimson.

"Oh! it's too splendid!" she stammered. "I—I can't bear it," and they heard a sob as she rushed away.

"I say!" remarked Haycraft, with meaning in his tone.

"Fred!" responded Flora, in a voice of such crushing severity that he hastened to apologise, and to assure her that he had not meant anything.

"Of course not. Why should you mean anything?" demanded Flora.

"Oh no, naturally. There was nothing that should make any one mean anything," he said lamely; whereupon, as a reward for his docility, Flora assured him she had great hopes that everything would come right, and when it did, he should know all about it, but that if he went and fancied things and made trouble, she would never speak to him again.

"All right! Henceforth I am blind and deaf and dumb," he declared.

"That's right! When you can't do anything

to help, at least you needn't spoil things. Oh, but that reminds me, Fred. I am not blind and deaf, you know. Is it true that Mr Beardmore is dead, as the servants say? "

" Yes, poor chap! and it was only last night that we were chaffing him about being seedy. He was so perfectly happy looking after the stores, you know, and we said he couldn't bear to think that he would soon have to write to the Colonel, ' Sir, I have the honour to report that the last ounce of food has been distributed according to instructions. Please send further orders.' His occupation would be gone, you see."

" Yes," said Flora absently; " but, Fred—only last night? That's fearfully sudden. Was it—is it true that it was—cholera? "

" Hush! " said Haycraft, looking round apprehensively, " you mustn't let it get about. If it's once suspected that cholera has broken out, we shall have the natives dying like flies of sheer terror. And there's no occasion for panic. It was the poor fellow's own fault—a case of the ruling passion, you know. He was mad to make the stores last out as long as possible, and there were a lot of tins that Tighe condemned as unfit for food. Beardmore was certain they were all right, and backed his opinion by trying one—with this result. But you see how it is. There's no reason for any one else to be frightened."

" I'm glad you told me," was Flora's only answer, " for now I can help to keep it from the rest."

" You're a trump, Flo! I'd share a secret with you

as soon as with any man I know." And with this unromantic tribute Flora was wholly satisfied.

Mabel had rushed away to her own room, and was now lying sobbing upon her bed, with her face pressed tightly into the pillow, lest any sound should reach Georgia's ears through the thin partition. At this moment even the news of the outbreak of cholera would not have disquieted her, for she had other things to think of. It seemed to her that a veil had been suddenly removed from her eyes, with the result that for the first time she saw Fitz Anstruther as he really was. "That boy," as she had been wont to call him, with friendly, half-contemptuous patronage, was a hero. He had gloried in making himself generally useful to Dick and Georgia, doing anything that needed doing, and requiring no thanks for it. Mabel herself had made a slave of him—a willing slave, undoubtedly, for he had entered into all her whims with a ready zest, not merely submitting to them, but furthering them. Why was this? Not because he was fit for nothing better than humouring her fancies, as she had been inclined to think, but because that was the way in which he had deliberately chosen to do her homage. It was because he loved her. Had he chosen, he could have beaten down her defences long ago, but his love knew itself so strong that it could afford to wait. It refused to accept defeat, but it responded to her appeal for mercy. Mabel sprang up from her bed, and began to walk about the room. She could not be still.

"Oh, how can he? how can he?" she demanded of herself. "To care for me so tremendously after the way I have treated him—a man who can do

such splendid things? How can I ever meet him? I daren't face him. He'll guess. I should be too dreadfully ashamed to let him know I have changed so suddenly. It seemed to come all at once. Oh, why didn't I care for him a little before? why did I say those awful things to him only the other day? why did I let even Flora see what a mean wretch I was? She said herself that I was mean. And now they'll all think it's just because he deserves the V.C. that I care for him, and it's not. It isn't what he did, but what he is—but no one will believe it. He has been quite as splendid all the time, and I never saw it; and when he speaks to me again, he'll think that I—I am different to him just because he didn't leave Sultan Jān to die. As if that signified! It's—it's simply because he cares for me that I care for him."

These considerations, though they might seem somewhat inconsistent with one another, made Mabel sit down in despair to think the matter out. First of all, how was she to nerve herself to meet Fitz again? and next, how was he to be brought to perceive the delicate distinction, that she loved him not because he had done a great thing, but because the doing of it had revealed his real self to her?

"I know," she said to herself at last; "I will meet him just as usual. I think I have pride and self-respect enough left for that, and when he speaks to me again I won't accept him at once. I won't refuse him again, of course, or at any rate, not definitely. I will be kinder, and give him a little hope. Then he will feel at liberty to try again," she laughed nervously; "and I can give in by degrees, so that he

will understand how it really is. Oh dear! how glad I am that he made that condition the other day."

For two or three days she waited impatiently, unable to carry out her plan, for Dr Tighe announced loudly that he was keeping Fitz a prisoner in hospital, and that he found him a perfect angel of a patient, not fussing a bit to be out before it was safe to let him go. Mabel received the statement with secret incredulity, judging of Fitz's feelings by her own, but when she did see him next, the meeting proved grievously disappointing. On the first day of his convalescence Mrs Hardy invited him to tea in the inner courtyard, with the special intimation that his mission there was to cheer up the inmates, and he did his duty nobly. The tea was very weak, and without milk, and Anand Masih, with shamefaced reluctance, handed round a few broken biscuits—the last that could be mustered—in his mistress's shining silver basket. It wounded his hospitable soul to see guests invited to a Barmecide feast, and when Mrs Hardy alluded pleasantly to the care he showed in keeping everything nice, he was covered with confusion. Fitz, decorated in several places with bandages and sticking-plaster, was the life of the party. He was particularly amusing on the subject of the stores, which came naturally to the front, since the rations had been reduced that day, in consequence of the deficiency caused by the unsoundness of some of the tinned provisions, of which Haycraft had spoken to Flora. Mabel sat listening, with an impatience that was almost disgust, to his funny stories of sieges and the shifts to which other besieged garrisons had been put—stories so palpably absurd that they

could not shed any additional gloom on the present situation. Then he turned upon Rahah, who came out of Georgia's room, followed by her inseparable companion, the great Persian cat. She had brought the baby for Fitz to see, with her mistress's compliments, and was not the Baba Sahib grown ?

"I'm looking with wolfish eyes at that cat of yours, ayah," he said, after duly admiring the baby. "Some morning you will find it gone."

"Then the Dipty Sahib will be found shot by Ismail Bakhsh," said Rahah, unmoved.

"Why, you don't mean to say you would have me killed for trying to get one good meal? You shouldn't keep the creature so fat if you don't want it stolen, you know. What do you feed it on—rats?"

"The cat shares with me, sahib."

"Well, that's very noble of you, I'm sure; but it would really be safer for the poor thing if you let it shift for itself."

"No one will eat the cat but my Memsahib," said Rahah severely. "When there is no food left, it will preserve her life for two or three days, and that is why I feed it with my own ration, sahib."

She departed with dignity, and the rest did not dare to laugh until she was out of hearing. Then Fitz took the lead in the conversation again, and talked away until Dr. Tighe appeared suddenly and haled him back to the hospital. Mabel was disappointed—bitterly disappointed. She had felt certain that he would perceive a change in her, even while she scouted the idea of allowing him to divine the cause of it, but he had not seemed to think of her at all. However, he imagined, no doubt, that he was con-

sulting her wishes by ignoring their compact altogether, and she consoled herself with thinking that things would be different to-morrow. But they were not. Day after day Fitz paid his afternoon visit to the courtyard, rattled away to Flora or Mrs Hardy or herself, and seemed to desire nothing more. She was puzzled. Could it be that he had actually forgotten their agreement, perhaps as a result of some injury to his brain? But no; it was evident that his mind was as clear as ever. What was it, then? Had he determined, during these long hours in the hospital, to crush down and root out the love which had met with so poor a return? Had her change of feeling come too late? Or, worst of all, had he seen her character too clearly in that last interview—had she shown herself in such colours of hardness and ingratitude that he had now no desire to ask his question again? Mabel writhed under the thought. Her one consolation was in the assurance that he had not perceived the change in her. She would die rather than let him know that her heart had warmed towards him as his had cooled towards her; and yet—such is the inconsistency of human nature—she felt it would kill her to go on in this way, and she did not wish to die just yet. Even when he was alone with her, there was nothing lover-like in his manner, and she felt bitterly that the tables were turned. It was she who now listened in vain for any softening in his voice, who longed to be allowed to do things for him, and could not, for very shame, offer her services. At first she was piqued by his behaviour, then hurt, at last made thoroughly miserable; but she flattered herself that

she hid her trouble from the world, at least as well as Fitz had hitherto contrived to hide his. For this reason it was a blow to discover one day that Mrs Hardy, who had been exclusively occupied with Georgia for some time, was now at leisure to think of other people's affairs. She opened her attack without the slightest warning beforehand.

"I don't like to see you looking so doleful, Miss North," she said briskly, finding Mabel sitting idle, in a somewhat disconsolate attitude.

"Why, do you think all our circumstances are so bright that I ought to be cheerful too?" asked Mabel, roused to defend herself. Mrs Hardy looked at her critically.

"It's not circumstances that are wrong in your case; it's yourself. You needn't try to blind me. Think of poor Mrs North. Do you ever see her looking doleful, or hear a murmur from her? No; because she persists in being cheerful for the child's sake and ours. You have spirit enough, too, to be bright before other people, but when you are alone you drop the mask. Can you deny it?"

"At least I don't drop the mask until I think I'm alone." The emphasis was marked.

"Now don't be angry with me for having my eyes open. I only want to see you happy. Why, child, you needn't be afraid to confide in me; I have lived a good deal longer than you, and seen about ten times as much. You're not the first person that has done a foolish thing in a hasty moment, and been sorry for it afterwards."

"I—I don't know what you mean," stammered Mabel.

“Why, dear me! what a pity it is to see two people going on at cross-purposes like this! Can't you bring yourself to let him know you're sorry? He's a proud man, we all know that, but he won't be proud to you. Why, he is suffering as much as you are, and the least word from you would bring him back.”

“It never struck me that pride had anything to do with it,” said Mabel, surprised.

“That's where a looker-on can see more than you do. Now, don't you be proud either. I suppose he made too much of his authority over you, and you were angry and insisted on giving him back his ring——”

“His ring!” gasped Mabel.

“Well, you are not wearing it, so I presume you gave it back. Now, just let me hint to him, in the very most delicate way in the world, of course, that you miss that ring from your finger, and trust me, it will be back there before another hour is over, and you and he both as happy as——”

But, to Mrs Hardy's astonishment and indignation, Mabel burst into a wild peal of laughter. “Oh, you mean *that*?” she cried. “Why, that happened centuries ago. I had forgotten all about it!”

CHAPTER XX.

THE FORCES OF NATURE.

THE days dragged slowly by in the beleaguered fort. The enemy's extraordinary dislike of coming to close quarters, and the consequent absence of direct attacks, tried the endurance of the garrison sorely. It showed, no doubt, that the tribes retained a wholesome remembrance of past hand-to-hand encounters, and were now actuated rather by a desire for loot than by any fanatical hatred of British rule; but it showed also that their leaders believed they had abundance of time before them. Moreover, while Bahram Khan maintained the investment with a cynical contempt for the relieving force which did not appear, the numbers of the defenders were dwindling. The death-roll did not indeed increase by leaps and bounds, as would have been the case after a series of fierce assaults, but the relentless monotony of its daily growth was scarcely less terrible. Disease had obtained a firm foothold in the crowded courtyards and narrow passages, and the supply of medicines and disinfectants was as limited as that of food had proved to be. A sowar dropped here, a Sikh there, next two or three of the wretched Hindu refugees, then one of the wounded in the

hospital, unable to resist the poisoned atmosphere of the place. The tiny patch of garden—once the despair of the Club committee, because nothing but weeds would grow in it—which had been used as a cemetery, was soon over-full, and now silent burying-parties stole down nightly to the water-gate, and were ferried across the canal to conduct a hasty funeral on the opposite bank. Mabel and Flora will never forget the night they stood on the south rampart to see Captain Leyward's body carried out. He had been desperately wounded when he took command of the escort in the Akrab Pass, after Dick was struck down, and although Dr Tighe was hopeful at first, it was not long before the case took an unfavourable turn. In order that the enemy should not discover these sallies of the garrison, the funeral rites were maimed indeed. There was no question of a band or a firing-party, and as it was not allowable even to use a lantern, Mr Hardy repeated portions of the Burial Service from memory. The grave, which had been hastily dug as soon as darkness came on, was made absolutely level with the surrounding sand as soon as it had been filled up. Its bearings were taken by compass in the hope of happier days to come, but no mark was placed upon it, for to point out that a British officer lay there would have been to invite the desecration of the spot. The two girls watched the dark mass of figures melt into the blackness beyond the embankment, and strained their eyes in vain to catch a glimpse of the group round the grave. They could see and hear nothing until the sudden creaking of the ferry-wires announced that the burial-party was returning, and soon afterwards

Colonel Graham came up to the rampart and ordered them down to bed.

Mabel wondered very much what Georgia's thoughts were at this time. She never alluded to the wild impulse which had led her to try and leave the fort, but she seemed to shrink into herself, and liked to be left alone with the baby for hours. When her friends came to speak to her, she showed an impatience that surprised them, until at last, in a burst of contrition for the irritation she had shown, she explained that she was listening for Dick's voice. She could hear it sometimes when the baby and she were alone together, but if there were other people in the room, their voices seemed to drown it. "What did he say?" Mabel ventured to ask, awed by her sister-in-law's tone of absolute conviction, and Georgia confessed, with some disappointment, that he had not said anything particular. It was as if they were just talking together as usual about things in general, and the conversation would break off abruptly, as if she was waking out of a dream. Mabel was disappointed also. If Dick could really speak to his wife from the dead, surely he would communicate his wishes about the boy's bringing-up or some subject of similar importance; but this casual talk—what could it be but a delusion of Georgia's troubled brain, which could not distinguish between dreams and realities?

In the meantime, the reconnaissance which Fitz had made in company with Sultan Jān was not entirely destitute of results. The news that a mine was in course of construction had alarmed Colonel Graham more than he cared to show, although the most careful

investigations possible in the circumstances went to prove that the tunnel had not at present reached the neighbourhood of the walls. Runcorn, who took the matter very much to heart, regarding it as a sign that he had not been sufficiently on the alert, obtained permission to make a solitary reconnaissance on two successive nights, and managed on the second occasion to creep across the cleared space, and up to the very walls of General Keeling's house. By dint of long and careful listening, with his ear to the ground, he satisfied himself that work was going on briskly, but that the tunnel was not yet nearly long enough to threaten the east curtain. After this, he held much consultation with Fitz, and the two formulated a desperate scheme. They proposed to creep into the enemy's entrenchments, carrying with them a supply of explosives, and blow up the mine before it was carried any further, destroying at the same time General Keeling's house, in the compound of which was the entrance shown to Fitz. The Colonel vetoed the plan promptly, but its inventors were not to be discouraged, and produced a fresh modification of it every day, until circumstances intervened with decisive effect to prevent its execution.

On a certain night Mabel awoke with the impression that she was passing anew through the most disagreeable experience of her voyage out—a gale in the Bay of Biscay. She could feel the ship trembling—it had been rolling just now—the passengers were screaming, and the wind seemed to be howling on all sides at once.

“A mast gone!” she said to herself, with a vague

recollection of sea-stories read in youth, as she heard a fearful crash ; “ but the wind howls just as if we were on land. I wonder whether I had better try to get on deck ? Why !—but how can we be on land ? ”

It was most confusing. She was awake now, and realised that the voyage had ended long ago, but it seemed impossible not to believe that she was still on board ship, for the floor was shaking when she stood upon it, and the little square of grey darkness which marked the position of the window was wavering about just as a porthole would naturally do in rough weather.

“ Am I going mad ? ” Mabel demanded of herself, yielding to a sudden lurch, and sitting down unsteadily on the side of her bed. “ No, I am actually beginning to feel sea-sick—that must be real, at any rate. Why, it must be the mine ! ”—she sprang up, and threw on her dressing-gown and a cloak over it—“ and what about Georgie and the boy ? ”

She tried to open her door, but the handle refused to act, and she was struggling with it frantically when she heard Mr Hardy’s voice calling to her from outside.

“ Kick, please ! ” she cried through the keyhole. “ I can’t get it open.”

A violent blow on the lower part of the door released the handle, at the same time that it sent Mabel staggering back into the room. In the semi-darkness she could dimly discern the old clergyman supporting himself by one of the pillars of the verandah, his white beard blown hither and thither by the wind.

“Your sister and the baby!” he cried. “We must get them out. My wife has sent me to see that they are safe.”

“What has happened?” gasped Mabel, as they made a dash side by side for Georgia’s verandah.

“Our roof has fallen in. My wife is partly buried, but she won’t let me do anything for her till Mrs North is safe. What’s this?”

A groan answered him, and the object over which he had stumbled proved to be Rahah, pinned to the ground by one of the beams from the verandah, which had struck her down and imprisoned her foot. Mr Hardy and Mabel succeeded in releasing the foot, not, however, in response to any appeal on Rahah’s part, for she entreated them incessantly to go and save the doctor lady and the Baba Sahib.

“We must carry her out on her bed,” panted Mabel, as they reached Georgia’s door, which had shut with a bang after Rahah had rushed out to see what was the matter. Mr Hardy forced it open with an effort of which Mabel would not have believed him capable, and they found Georgia sitting up in bed, with the baby clasped in her arms.

“Lie down again, Mrs North, and hold the child tight,” said Mr Hardy cheerily, and he and Mabel seized the bedstead, and succeeded in dragging it to the door. Here, however, it stuck fast, and in the darkness they could not see what was the matter. To add to the horror of this detention, the ominous shaking began again, and fragments of wood and tiles began to clatter down from the part of the verandah which remained standing.

“Oh, what shall we do?” cried Mabel in an

agony, as she pulled and pushed, and Mr Hardy tugged and strained, without effect. "We must leave the bed, and help her to walk."

"No, no," said a voice behind her, and she felt herself moved gently aside. "Take the boy and carry him into the middle of the yard, and we will manage this."

She obeyed unquestioningly, and saw Fitz strike a match, which shed a flickering light on the scene. Extinguishing the light carefully, he called to Mr Hardy to pull the bedstead back and turn it slightly, thus bringing it through the doorway without difficulty. They carried it out to the spot where Mabel was standing, and Fitz raced back immediately into the room, to return with an umbrella and all the rugs he could lay hands upon.

"Hold it over her head. We shall have torrents of rain in a minute or two!" he cried, as he went to the help of Mr Hardy, who was trying to lift Rahah away from the dangerous spot where she lay.

"Are there mines all round us?" asked Mabel in bewilderment, as they returned, just escaping the fall of another portion of the roof.

"Mines! This is an earthquake!" he called back, starting again to the relief of Mrs Hardy, of whose uncomfortable position her husband's stammering and excited accents had only just made him aware.

"Where is the Baba Sahib?" cried a frantic voice, and Ismail Bakhsh crawled up, bruised and dishevelled; "and what of my Memsahib?"

"Safe, fool!" answered Rahah contemptuously,

as she sat nursing her injured foot, "and no thanks to thee."

"Peace, woman! Did not the verandah roof descend upon me as I sat beneath it, and did I not lie there senseless until I came to myself and fought my way out to help the Baba Sahib and his mother?"

"If you are able to move, Ismail Bakhsh, go and help the sahibs to dig out the Padri's Mem," said Georgia faintly, cutting short the squabble, and Ismail Bakhsh obeyed. Before very long the rescuers came back triumphant, in company with Anand Masih, who had refused to leave his mistress, even at her express command, and had succeeded before help came in removing a good deal of the weight that pressed upon her.

"Well, my dear, all's well that end's well," said Mrs Hardy, hobbling up and dropping stiffly on a rug beside Georgia. "Hurt? Oh, nonsense!" in response to the anxious inquiries showered upon her; "bruised and knocked about a little, but that's all, and we ought to be very thankful that it's no worse. If those roofs hadn't been jerry-built, probably none of us would have escaped with our lives, but the beams were not solid enough, as I have often said. And now the worst is over, so we had better make ourselves as comfortable as we can here for the rest of the night."

But this consoling view of things proved to be premature, for even as Mrs Hardy spoke, there came another long-drawn, moaning gust of wind, and the ground trembled slightly, then rocked.

"Couldn't we move to a safer place?" asked Mabel, for whom the sight of the shaking buildings

round the little courtyard had an awful fascination. They seemed to her to be actually leaning towards her.

“There is no safer place inside the walls,” said Fitz quickly.

“Will the wall over the canal stand this?” asked Mr Hardy, in a low voice, of Fitz, who shook his head and raised his eyebrows, just as a stentorian voice rang out from the nearest tower.

“Come down, you fools! Don’t you see that wall will go in a minute?”

“That’s Woodworth calling down the Sikhs,” explained Fitz, with a smile that did him credit. “If a volcano opened at their very feet, they would stay where they were until they received orders to retire. How will it fall?” he muttered to Mr Hardy.

“If it falls inwards, that will be the end of us,” was the calm reply of Mrs Hardy, who had caught the words.

“Heaven is as near to Khemistan as to England,” said Mr Hardy, laying his hand gently on Georgia’s shoulder. She had started up wildly.

“I don’t mind for myself; it’s the boy!” she cried. “Oh, won’t some one save him? What will Dick do when he comes back and finds no one left?”

“I would take him, Mrs North, indeed I would, if I thought there was a better chance anywhere else,” said Fitz, to whom her agonised eyes appealed; “but it would be much worse in the passages, or under any roof. We are safer here than in most places.”

“May God have mercy upon us all!” said Mr

Hardy solemnly, as the ground began to rock so violently that they found it impossible to keep their feet. Half-kneeling, half-crouching, they waited. There was a moment of awful expectation, then a crash louder than any that had come before. To Mabel's eyes, the dark line of wall visible above the roofs was slowly but surely descending upon them, and horror seemed to freeze her blood. Without knowing it, she seized Fitz's hand, and clung to it desperately. It was a support to have any companionship at that dreadful moment, but she did not trouble to ask herself why she should suddenly feel safe, almost happy. And still the mass of wall hung poised above them for a long, long time—at least, so it seemed, for no appreciable interval can in reality have elapsed; but at the same moment that it struck Mabel that the line against the sky was becoming lower instead of higher, some one called out: "It's falling the other way!" There was a sound which could only be likened to the simultaneous discharge of a whole battery of 81-ton guns, a shock which threw them all down, and immediately the air was thick with dust and pieces of brick and stone. When it had cleared a little they rubbed their eyes. The line of wall was gone.

Before any one could utter a word, down came the rain in torrents, and the baby relieved the strain of the situation by expressing his dissatisfaction at the very top of his voice. Every one else became conscious at once of a sense of guilt, and Ismail Bakhsh and Fitz, jumping up, set to work to contrive a shelter for his royal highness. Before very long, he and his mother were packed away underneath

the bed, with all the rugs and umbrellas that could be found arranged over, under, or around them; and when he had permitted himself to be comforted, the rest felt easier in their minds. Uncertain whether any further shocks were likely to occur, they durst not return to their rooms; but the matting which had been hung along the front of the verandah was supported on sticks to form a sort of tent, and under this they sat, wishing for the day. Fitz hurried away when he had helped to erect the tent, saying that he might be needed elsewhere, and Mabel was left to wonder whether his arm had really been round her when the wall fell. He had sheltered her afterwards from the flying fragments, that she knew, but her mind was not quite clear as to what had happened first.

Fortunately for the dwellers in the inner court, they did not in the least realise the full extent of the damage caused by the earthquake, alarming though their own experiences had been. The whole south front of the fort now lay open to the enemy, for both lines of defence had disappeared simultaneously. Not only had the wall given way, tearing down with it half of the south-western tower, which had been partially undermined by the flood at the beginning of the siege, but in its fall it had completely choked the canal as far as the south-eastern angle. The other walls and towers, the bases of which were sound, had resisted the shocks with wonderful tenacity, but the temporary defences built up of stones and sand-bags, as also the shelters erected as a protection against a cross-fire, were

absolutely wrecked. A portion of the materials used had fallen inside the fort, but the greater part was scattered about on the cleared space round. This was the situation at three o'clock in the morning.

"If only the enemy knew the state we are in!" said Colonel Graham, when the extent of the disaster had been roughly estimated.

"I rather hope their own troubles are giving them enough to do, sir," said Beltring. "I am certain I heard an explosion in their lines just before our wall fell, and there were screams enough for anything."

"Let us hope they are too busy to attend to us, then. What is it, Runcorn? I see you have something to propose."

"May I suggest, sir, that we should set to work at once to clear out the canal, even before repairing the walls? If the flow continues to be stopped, we shall soon have a marsh all round us, and yet there will be no way of getting water but by digging."

The Colonel looked doubtful. "But surely it is impossible to move all that mass of rubbish with the means we have?"

"Yes, sir; we can't hope to restore the whole channel. But I think we could clear a passage just wide enough to keep the water running, and perhaps to check the enemy's rush for a moment, and the current itself will soon make it wider."

"It's worth thinking of. But while the canal is being cleared out we must build a breastwork behind it, or there will be no cover against a fire from

the opposite bank ; and we must restore our traverses and sangars on the other walls and the towers. Every man in the fort must set to work, for we can only count on two hours or so more of darkness. See that the men are mustered by word of mouth, Woodworth. We don't want to force the fact of our wakefulness on the enemy."

In a very few minutes the fort and its surroundings presented a scene of intense activity. In the cleared space men were collecting the stones and sandbags dashed from the parapets, and sending them up again by means of ropes, while beyond them were several scouts, lying flat on the ground, and trying hard to pierce with their eyes the darkness and the pouring rain in the direction of the enemy. At the back of the fort Runcorn, with a number of volunteers and a large fatigue party, was levering away huge masses of mud-brick, and digging through heaps of broken rubbish, while behind him Colonel Graham was superintending the construction of the work which was to replace the vanished rampart. There was no attempt to build anything at all answering to the curtain which had been destroyed, for weeks of labour would be needed to clear the canal-bed of the rubbish that choked it up ; but such stones and bricks as could be found were piled together, and backed by heaps of earth, and then the work ceased perforce for want of material. There was no time to burrow into the muddy chaos for suitable fragments, and the remaining masses of brickwork were too large to be moved with the means at hand. But the pause was only a short one. All the empty boxes in the fort were requisitioned.

tioned, filled with earth, and built into the wall, but still more were needed. Officers rushed to their quarters, hurled their possessions on the floor, and reappeared with portmanteaus and uniform-cases. Fitz brought the tin boxes that had held the documents of which he was guardian, and the refugees were forced to resign the gaily painted wooden chests some of them had succeeded in bringing in with them. Before very long the excitement penetrated to the memsahibs' courtyard, the inmates of which had now returned to their rooms.

"Georgie, let us give them our boxes!" cried Mabel.

"Yes, anything!" returned Georgia, sitting up with flushed cheeks. "Turn all the things out, Mab. Oh, I wish I could come and help!"

"Give them that plate-box, Anand Masih," said Mrs Hardy to the faithful bearer, who was sitting stolidly upon the piece of property in question, which was his own particular charge. He obeyed with a heart-rending sigh, tying up the silver carefully in a blanket before he surrendered the box.

"Georgie, they want more!" cried Mabel, flying back into the court. "They are filling greatcoats with earth and tying them up by the sleeves. What can we give them?—pillow-cases?—mattresses?"

"*Skirts*," said Georgia, with the ardour of a sudden discovery. "They would make beautiful sacks if they were sewn up at the hem."

"Oh, my poor tailormades!" groaned Mabel; "but for my country's sake—" and she dashed into her own room, and reappeared with two or three tweed skirts and a supply of needles and thread.

“ Oh, really, Miss North, I haven’t asked for this sacrifice,” said Colonel Graham, unable to restrain a smile when he found himself solemnly presented with the results of her handiwork.

“ No, but it’s made now, and Flora will bring you some of hers in a minute. She hasn’t quite finished sewing them up. Oh, do use them quickly, please, or I shall repent, and lose the credit of the self-denial after all.”

“ The shape is a little unusual,” said Colonel Graham, considering the skirts gravely, “ but we can certainly use the—the contribution for strengthening the breastwork. You ladies deserve well of your country, I am sure.”

“ The women of Carthage are quite outdone,” said Mr Burgrave, who was standing by; but at the sound of his voice Mabel fled back into the court. Her own feelings during the past few days had taught her to understand something of the pain she had inflicted on him, and she could not face his eyes.

“ All the scattered material collected and brought in, sir,” reported Haycraft, who had been in command of the party at work on the cleared space, “ and I have recalled the scouts. It’s a queer thing, but the enemy have had a mounted man patrolling between their lines and ours the whole time. It was too dark to see him, but I heard him distinctly. He was riding round the fort, or rather round three sides of it, from one point on the canal to the other.”

“ That encourages one to hope that they have suffered as much as we have,” said the Colonel. “ Very likely, if we only knew it, they are in deadly

fear of an attack from us ; but I couldn't venture to leave our rear exposed while we made a sortie."

"The water runs, sir," said Runcorn, coming up, "and with a few poles and some canvas I could make a shelter for the water-carriers at a point where it's fairly easy to get down to the edge."

"Take them, by all means. What about the south-west tower?"

"I have tested it in every way I can, sir, and I think what's left of it will stand all right, but there's no hope of patching it up at present."

"I foresee that this breastwork will be the burden of our lives," said Colonel Graham to the Commissioner, as Runcorn departed. "We shall have to keep the guard there always under arms, and extra sentries in the tower ruins, for the enemy could take it with a rush at any moment, even if it didn't topple down under their weight."

"Yes, it strikes one that there is a certain lack of privacy about the new arrangement as compared with the old," said Mr Burgrave. "It is like finding the public suddenly in possession of one's back garden."

"I should very much like to know what damage the enemy have sustained. Do you care to come with me to the gateway? It ought soon to be light enough to see."

An exclamation broke from both men as the dawn revealed to them the outlines of the enemy's position. Half-way across the cleared space extended a curious fissure, and when this was traced back, it lost itself in a heap of ruins to the right of General Keeling's house. The house itself still stood, although

the stone sangars on its roofs were destroyed, but the loopholed buildings which had faced it were gone.

“The mine!” was the cry that leaped to the lips of both Colonel Graham and Mr Burgrave, and the former added, “It must have exploded prematurely when Beltring heard the noise, but in the crash of our own wall the rest of us did not notice it.”

“This explains the enemy’s anxiety to keep us at a distance,” said the Commissioner. “But why employ a mounted patrol, and only one man?”

“It was simply to give an impression of watchfulness, I suppose. Can you suggest any other explanation, Ressaldar?” and the Colonel turned to Badullah Khan, who stood beside them.

“That was no enemy, sahib. It was Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib Bahadar.”

“Nonsense!” cried Mr Burgrave. The native officer drew himself up.

“We who knew Kīlin Sahib can judge better than the Kumpsioner Sahib what he would do. When we have heard him riding all night between us and the enemy, preventing them from attacking us, are we to doubt the witness of our own ears—nay, our eyes, since certain of the sowars swear that they beheld him?”

“I beg your pardon, Ressaldar,” said the Commissioner, with marked politeness. “I suppose it will now be an article of faith all along the frontier that General Keeling saved the fort last night?”

“Without doubt, sahib. Is it not the truth?”

“I must say I wish my faith was as robust as the regiment’s!” said the Commissioner with a smile, as they turned to descend the steps.

“ A white flag, sir ! ” reported Winlock, who was on guard at the gateway when they reached the ground.

“ Who is carrying it ? ”

“ A Hindu with two servants. The sowars say that it is Bahram Khan’s *diwan*, Narayan Singh.”

“ Let him come within speaking distance—no farther.”

“ Perhaps I ought to say, sir, if you are thinking that he wants to see what state we are in, that they have found that out already. A scout on a swift camel rode along the opposite bank of the canal a few minutes ago. He was near enough to see what we were doing, but he came and went like the wind, before the men could take up their carbines. Since he was gone so quickly, I did not call you.”

“ I wish we could have caught him, but we can’t expect to keep them from discovering our plight. But certainly we won’t have them spying about under the walls. Let the Sikhs have their rifles ready, in case of treachery.”

Before inviting Mr Burgrave to return with him to the turret, Colonel Graham went the round of the defences, to make sure that the sentries were all on the alert. He had in his mind more than one occasion on which the tribes had advanced to the attack under cover of a parley, and with the rear of the fort in its present condition he could not neglect any precautions. The heaps of rubbish on the opposite bank of the narrow channel which Runcorn had cleared for the water were a cause for constant anxiety, since a small force of resolute men posted behind them might render the new breastwork

untenable, but nothing could be done to them at present.

“ I would give ten years of my life for a forty-eight hours’ armistice ! ” said the Colonel to Mr Burgrave, as they mounted the steps to the loophole of the turret, below which the Hindu was waiting, his two attendants having paused at a respectful distance.

“ What message do you bring ? ” asked Colonel Graham, after the usual salutations had been exchanged.

“ This unworthy one brings to your lordship the words of Syad Bahram Khan, Sword-of-the-Faith : ‘ Who can stand against the will of Allah ? This night His hand has been heavy upon my army, even as upon that of the sahibs, and many men are killed, and many also buried while yet alive under the ruins of their quarters. Let there then be peace between us for three days. We will continue to hold our lines from the bridge to the godowns, but we will not cross the canal, nor come out upon the open space ; and I would have the sahibs swear also that they will keep to their fort and the other bank of the canal, and not cross it on either side to attack us. Then shall the dead be buried and the injured cared for, and both sides may also repair their damaged defences, but it is forbidden to raise any new ones. What is the answer of the Colonel Sahib ? ’ ”

“ Can’t be much doubt, can there ? ” said Colonel Graham to the Commissioner.

“ I suppose not. But how coolly they talk of wasting three days ! It seems as if they thought they had a lifetime before them to spend on this siege. ”

“ Well, so much the better for us—on this occasion, at any rate. When is the armistice to begin ? ” he asked of Narayan Singh ; “ now, or to-morrow morning ? ”

“ At daybreak to-morrow, sahib,” was the answer, after a moment’s consideration.

“ So be it,” said Colonel Graham. “ Then they *have* something on hand ! ” he added to Mr Burgrave. “ If Bahram Khan were all anxiety for his wounded, as he would like us to think, of course he would want the armistice to begin at once. But he knows we shan’t fire at his men if they begin digging out the poor wretches now, and he would like three clear days for some plot of his own. What can it be ? ”

“ Perhaps he merely hopes to catch us off our guard to-day,” suggested the Commissioner.

“ But if that’s his game, no scruples of conscience would have kept him from making use of the armistice for the purpose. No, he’s up to something, and I should very much like to know what it is. I shall post a look-out at the top of the north-west tower with the best field-glass we have, to keep an eye on all that goes on in their camp.”

The Colonel’s prevision was justified early the next morning, when the look-out announced that a small body of fully armed men, all mounted, among whom he believed he could distinguish Bahram Khan himself, had left the town and were proceeding towards the north-east, apparently in the direction of Nalapur.

“ I am very much afraid that bodes ill to poor old Ashraf Ali,” said the Colonel. “ I only wish we could warn him.”

“ After all, sir,” said Haycraft, to whom he had spoken, “ Bahram Khan may only be off to see how the blockade of Rahmat-Ullah is going on. It’s evident he thinks we’re stuck pretty fast here, for really, if we had the proper number of horses, and anywhere to go to, we might take advantage of the armistice to disappear, they have left so few men in their lines.”

“ I prefer the shelter of even our tumble-down walls to being surrounded in the desert,” said the Colonel shortly. “ And now to work ! ”

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DEAD THAT LIVED.

THERE was some grumbling when it became known that only half the garrison was to go to work on the defences at a time, the other half remaining under arms, but Colonel Graham knew the enemy too well to omit any precaution. He thought it most unlikely that the armistice would be allowed to expire without an attempt to surprise the defenders of the fort, and it was highly probable that Bahram Khan's departure was intended purely as a blind. Hence the sentries were posted as usual upon walls and towers, and scouts were thrown out in both directions along the line of the canal, so that the working-parties might safely give their full attention to the matter in hand. As usual, the first work to be done was the digging of several graves, for the earthquake had found victims both in the refugees' quarters and in the hospital, where two of the wounded had died of sheer terror, but when the funerals were over, the rubbish-heaps were attacked with a will. Stones and pieces of brickwork of manageable size were put aside to strengthen the makeshift rampart on the inner bank, while the dust and loose earth was carried

some little distance, and spread evenly over the ground, so as to offer no cover whatever. When this had been done, Runcorn pressed forward the all-important work of the further clearing of the canal, a dirty and laborious job which it would require months to accomplish properly. As things were, the whole of the time at the disposal of the garrison produced very little apparent effect, and it needed unflinching tact and the constant force of example to keep the weary labourers at work. Colonel Graham took his turn with the rest, so that the younger men could not for very shame rebel against the task, while Mr Burgrave, for whom active labour was out of the question, stimulated the ardour of the native workmen by offering rewards for the best record of work done.

To the inmates of the Memsahibs' courtyard, the armistice brought little change. They were allowed to cross the canal, and walk about a little on the opposite bank, but they were forbidden to venture upon the irrigated land by themselves, and no one was at liberty to escort them even as far as the outlying pickets. Mabel and Flora carried the baby across, that it might breathe the air outside prison walls for the first time in its life, as Mabel said, and they sat upon a heap of crumbling rubbish amidst clouds of dust and watched the men at work, until it dawned upon them that their room was more desired than their company, whereupon they returned to the fort, and found a seat upon the ramparts. On ordinary occasions this was forbidden ground, but the armistice had been faithfully observed so far, and in spite of his misgivings Colonel Graham

gave them leave to enjoy the air and sky while they might.

“ Oh dear ! I feel like the naughty little boy in the spelling-book,” sighed Mabel. “ Everybody is too busy to talk to me. Isn’t it dull, Flora ? I do wish something would happen.”

“ Why, what a martial spirit you are developing ! ” said Flora. “ Do you yearn for an attack at this moment ? ”

“ Oh, nonsense ! I don’t mean that sort of thing. I mean something interesting.”

Her eyes strayed involuntarily to the spot where Fitz was at work down below, and the thought crossed her mind that she would make him look up at her.

“ But I won’t,” she decided. “ He would know I was thinking of him, and he doesn’t deserve it.” She had only spoken to him once since the earthquake, and then it seemed to her that his manner was almost apologetic, as if he knew he had offended her, but was anxious to show that she need not fear a repetition of the offence. “ So I suppose he did put his arm round me,” she reflected, “ but if I wasn’t angry, why should he behave as though I had been ? If he does care for me still, why should he be so anxious to pretend he doesn’t ? Flora ! ” she turned suddenly upon her friend, who was engrossed in trying to read some meaning into the baby’s inarticulate gurglings, “ have you said anything to Mr Anstruther about our talk the other day ? about wholesome neglect, I mean ? ”

“ I ? ” asked Flora, looking up quickly, “ to him, about you ? Mab ! as if I would ever give away

another girl to any man in the world! Of course not. You ought to know me better than that."

"I didn't really think you had," said Mabel lamely. "It was only—" she stopped, for the thought in her mind was that she wished there had been some such explanation of Fitz's silence, since in that case she could at least have felt sure that he had not changed his mind.

It was the evening of the third day of the armistice, and as the sun began to set, the tired labourers in what was pleasantly called the "back garden" were able to look with pride upon the result of their toil. It is true that all were not satisfied with it, for the inexorable Runcorn, finding the work he had mapped out actually accomplished, was anxious to make further improvements. Since, however, the erection of sangars on the roof of Mabel's room and of the hospital had rendered it possible to bring a converging fire to bear on all parts of the temporary breastwork, the Colonel considered any more tampering with the canal-banks unadvisable, and work was declared to be at an end. The sowars and other natives had already been marched back into the fort, but the white men lingered for a few minutes' idleness in the fresh air. Runcorn was still urging his point on the rest, who were lounging in various attitudes of ease on the bank, when a shot was fired overhead.

"What's up?" shouted Woodworth.

"There's a fellow on Gun Hill," answered Winlock's voice from the ruined tower. "He seemed to be displaying a good deal of interest in our arrange-

ments, so I sent a gentle reminder pretty near him."

"Don't you go breaking armistices, or we shall get into trouble," Fitz called out, and the subject dropped, but presently a hail from the farthest scout in the direction of the bridge brought every man to his feet.

"He's stopped some one—only one man—perhaps it's a messenger!" cried Beltring. "Take your guns, you idiots! it may be a trap," as the rest started off at a run. "Bring him with you, and retire on the next man," he shouted to the Sikh, who obeyed, keeping his bayonet pointed at the stranger's breast.

"What is it?" inquired the white men breathlessly, as they ran up, to find the two stolid Sikhs guarding a feeble figure in native dress.

"Don't fire," said the newcomer in English. "Don't fire!"

"No, no, they won't," said Woodworth impatiently. "Who are you?"

"Don't f—" began the stranger again, then looked round helplessly. "I can't—I can't—" he faltered, then threw off his turban with a hasty movement of the hand. "Don't you—any of you——?" he murmured.

"Are you English?" demanded Woodworth, with considerable misgiving, as he took in the details of the man's appearance—the unkempt hair, the scanty grey beard, the lack-lustre eyes, and the bony face, with the lips trembling pitifully.

"Not one of you?" went on the stranger, recovering himself a little. "Anstruther!"

"I do! I do!" cried Fitz, with a mighty shout. "You fellows, are you blind? It's the Major!"

"The Major? Impossible!" was the cry, as Fitz wrung the newcomer's hand with painful warmth. The idea seemed absurd, but gradually conviction grew upon the rest, and they stood round in awkward silence. Dick's eyes sought their faces one by one.

"What is it?" he asked, turning anxiously back to Fitz. "Will no one tell me? Is—is—how is——?"

"As well as possible," cried Fitz joyously. "Never given you up for an hour, Major. And the *baba* is a boy, the pride of the whole place."

"Thank God!" said Dick fervently, and at the words the last remnants of the distrust with which the rest had regarded him melted away.

"Forgive us, Major. We've thought of you so long as dead that we couldn't believe our eyes," said Woodworth. "Have you been a prisoner all this time, after all?"

"North, my dear fellow!" Colonel Graham broke into the group and seized Dick's hand. "Thank God you're alive! This will be new life to Mrs North. But look here, we mustn't let her see you like this. The fright would undo any good she might get."

"I suppose I am rather a scarecrow," said Dick slowly. He spoke with a curious hesitation, as though the words he wished to use would not come to his lips. "But I have been at death's door until very lately, and now I have had no food for three days."

"Woodworth," said Colonel Graham, "post a

sentry before the door of the ladies' courtyard, and don't let any one go in to carry the news. Happily they are none of them on the walls this evening. Now, North, for your wife's sake, to save her an awful shock, you'll come to my quarters and have a bath and a shave and something to eat, and get into some of my clothes. You'll be a different man then. Can you walk?"

"I have walked a good deal yesterday and to-day, but I can do a little more," said Dick, accepting gratefully the arm which was offered him.

"Close round, and let us smuggle him in," said Colonel Graham to the rest. "We don't want the men to hear the news before Mrs North. Let them think it's a messenger who has got through in disguise."

The other men waited outside the Colonel's quarters until, after the lapse of a miraculously short space of time, Dick came out again. They raised a subdued cheer when they saw him, for once more in uniform, he looked his old self. The feebleness was gone from his gait, and he held himself erect again. His hair and moustache, though greyer than before, had resumed their usual aspect, and the straggling beard was gone, so that but for the excessive thinness, which made the clothes hang loosely about him, he seemed little changed. The rest pressed forward to shake hands with him.

"We were a set of fools not to know you, Major," said Beltring, "but at the moment I hadn't a doubt you were a spy."

"Well," said Dick, as the others laughed shamefacedly, "that didn't matter; but when you all

stood and looked at me without speaking, I made certain something frightful had happened. See you all afterwards; I can't wait now."

He passed on into the inner courtyard, where Mabel and Flora were sitting talking in the verandah. Both sprang up as his shadow came between them and the sunset.

"Dick!" shrieked Mabel. "Then Georgie was right after all! But don't stay here." She was dragging him in the direction of Georgia's room. "I daren't keep you from her a moment."

Forgetful of everything but the unconquerable faith which was justified at last, she would not detain him even to greet him herself, but he drew back on the threshold.

"Oughtn't you to break it to her? The shock might be too great."

"The shock? She's expecting you, has been for weeks!" cried Mabel hysterically. "Oh, Dick, I could die of joy!"

"Mab," came in Georgia's tones through the half-closed door, "I hear Dick's voice. Bring him in—bring him in."

"Oh, go on. She mustn't get up; it'll hurt her," cried Mabel, pushing the door open.

"Georgie, if you get up," cried Dick, charging into the room, "I'll— Oh, Georgie, Georgie!" He fell on his knees by the bed, and there was a long silence, interrupted only by broken words and sobs. As for Mabel, she banged the door, and rushed away to cry somewhere in private.

"My poor dear boy!" said Georgia at last, her voice still trembling, as she passed her hand over

Dick's forehead, "you have wanted me very much, haven't you?"

"Your boy is a very old boy, I'm afraid—quite grey-haired now, Georgie. Wanted you? of course I have—words can't express how much."

"I know. And you called to me one whole day and night, didn't you?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so. But how did you know?"

"I heard you. I tried to get to you, Dick, but they wouldn't let me."

"It's a mercy they didn't. Oh, Georgie, you blessed woman, what it is to see you again!"

"And—?" cried Georgia. "Oh, you've forgotten—I've forgotten! Look here, Dick. You have never even thought of him. Take him up, and hold him in your arms."

"Don't you think it's happier as it is?" inquired Dick, poking the baby gingerly with a tentative finger.

"It? It's your son, Dick. Take him up at once. I want to see you together. Now, isn't he splendid?"

"Little beggar's not a scrap like you," grumbled Dick.

"No," said Georgia, with entire satisfaction; "every one says he's the image of you."

"Oh no; not really?" protested Dick in dismay.

"Why not? He's a beautiful baby. Look what lovely eyes he has. And see how good he is; *mens aequa in arduis* ought to be his motto, I always say."

"Oh, very well; if he feels it a hardship for me to hold him, I quite agree," and the baby was returned

with elaborate gentleness to the basket which served as a cradle.

"Dick, aren't you pleased? Don't you really like him?" Georgia's eyes were full of tears.

"*Like* him? My dear girl, in a day or two I shall be prouder of him than you are. But you see, it's you I've been thinking of all this time, and I can't think of anything else yet. I want to sit by you and look at you and hold your hand for hours and hours, and think of nothing but that I've got you again."

"I won't accept compliments at my baby's expense," laughed Georgia through her tears.

"Ah, he's quite taken my place, I see. Now, old girl, I'm only joking. There!" Dick lifted the baby again, and laid it carefully in Georgia's arms; "you hold him, and let me look at you both."

Mabel, in the meantime, was sobbing in a corner of the verandah. Her tears were purely tears of joy, but her attitude, as she sat crouched on the floor (for the boxes which had once served as seats were now a portion of the breastwork), was desolate enough to melt the heart of any sympathetic spectator. So, at least, it seemed to Fitz, who came hurrying through the passage, and pulled up, in astonishment and alarm, just in time to avoid stumbling over her.

"What is it, Miss North? Anything wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh no; it's only—that I'm so—happy," said Mabel, between her sobs. "I came here to be out

of the way," she added, rising with all the dignity she could muster, and shaking the dust from her skirts, "but it seems impossible to find a place where one can be by oneself."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Please don't let me interrupt you. I only came to ask when the Major would like to see the men. They are wild to welcome him back. If you will just ask him, I'll go away directly."

"I won't disturb him and Georgia now," said Mabel. "If the men come in an hour's time, I'll tell him before that, and he will be ready to see them."

"Oh, thanks." He turned to go, then hesitated a moment, and came back. "I want just to say one thing, Miss North—about that promise you gave me."

"Oh, don't!" cried Mabel hysterically. "You haven't treated me fairly about it. It's cruel to keep such a thing hanging over me, so that I am in terror whenever I see you."

"Why, what a low brute you must have thought me! But really I didn't mean to be such an out-and-out cad as all that. I thought you knew me better—and I did try to show you what I meant. You couldn't imagine that I would hold you to a promise which I practically forced you to make?"

"Oh!" said Mabel. An unprejudiced listener would have said that she had not only expected but desired to be held to her promise. But Fitz was not unprejudiced, and he went on earnestly.

"This is how it was. I told you I should go on

hoping, you know (and I do still, for the matter of that). And I had a sort of idea that you might be changing your mind just a little—of course it was awful cheek on my part—and I thought I'd put it to the test. So I asked you for that promise, just to see how you'd take it. But when I saw how you felt about it, I never thought of going any further. Didn't you understand, really? I thought I must have made it clear that I was quite content to be your friend until you could give me more—of your own free will. Oh, you must have seen."

Mabel's heart felt like lead, but she made a gallant effort to appear indifferent. "Of course I saw that you avoided me——" she began.

"Oh no—it has been you who avoided me," protested Fitz.

"Oh, well, it's very much the same," wearily. "And I am sorry to say I misjudged you. I thought you were trying to make me feel that you had a hold over me. I must apologise for that. Then you give me back my promise?" she added suddenly.

"Not at all. I am keeping it for another time."

"But that's a trick. You are just as bad as I thought."

"You must really imagine that I have a perfect mania for being refused. I have told you that I believe you'll have me yet, and that I shall go on hoping until you do. Don't you see that I'm keeping your promise in store solely out of consideration for you—to save you from the very unpleasant necessity of letting me know when you do make up your mind?"

“ I believe—you are laughing at me ! ” said Mabel, in wounded and incredulous amazement.

“ Laughing—I ? Not a bit of it. Look at me and see. I am serious, if you are not. Well, you see, I have only got back the freedom of which I deprived myself at first. Say it was by a trick, if you like—though I didn’t intend it so—but I don’t think you need be afraid of the way I shall use it. I shan’t waste the promise, I assure you. Until the right time comes, I am nothing but your friend, and the promise is exactly as if it didn’t exist.”

“ But,” protested Mabel, “ you seem to expect me to—to——”

“ Haven’t I just said that I want to save you from anything of the kind ? You see, it’s not as if I had any number of opportunities to waste. I have only the one, and I don’t mean to use it until I can lay it out to good advantage.”

“ Well,” said Mabel desperately, “ I think you are most ungenerous. You want me to feel myself entirely dependent upon your forbearance—and you call yourself a gentleman ! ”

“ Miss North, do you wish me to give you back your promise ? ”

“ Yes, of course. Why not ? ”

“ Because, if I do, you will naturally feel bound in honour to give me a hint when your feelings change. You couldn’t intend us both to go on in misery because my mouth was shut and you wouldn’t speak ? ”

“ You seem to put me in the wrong at every turn,” sobbed Mabel. “ Oh, I wish you would go away ! ” and he went.

Now, at least, Mabel ought to have been happy. But she was not. After assuring herself several times over that she hated Fitz, she proceeded to give the lie promptly to her assurances, while looking the situation in the face.

“He *will* make it depend on me,” she lamented to herself, “and it’s simple cowardice on his part, because he thinks I should refuse him again. Well, I know I said I should, but I meant to give him a little hope. As it is, I don’t like him to be so masterful, and I won’t give in. He has managed to get a horrible hold over me, but I will not let him see it. I won’t give in. Oh dear, why can’t he ask me properly? why can’t something happen to put things right? If he knew how I cared for him, I wonder whether he would say anything? But I am glad he doesn’t guess; yes—I—am—glad. If I let him see it, he would think he could ride roughshod over me ever after. No, he wouldn’t, he’s too generous, but I should hate his being generous at my expense. I suppose I don’t care for him enough, or I should be glad to give in. So it’s better as it is.”

She dried her eyes with great determination, whereupon another thought came immediately to fill them again with tears.

“What shall I do to-morrow morning? Each day I have thought, ‘Perhaps he will speak to-day!’ and now I know he won’t, unless I let him see in some way—but I won’t! I won’t! I won’t! What an idiot I am! I feel like the foolish woman who plucks down her house with her own hands. Oh, why has Georgie got everything and I nothing? But I have, of course. I have got Dick back again

just as much as she has, and I suppose I don't deserve anything more. But I don't know why this particularly horrible thing should happen to me. It's not as if I had ever led any one on—except poor Eustace. I did really flirt with him at first, so I suppose this is my punishment. If he knew he would say it was only just. But the rest—why, Captain Winlock or Mr Beltring or Captain Woodworth would propose to-morrow if I held up my little finger. I could have any of them I liked—except the right one. It would serve him right if I flirted with one of them now, and made him jealous—” she grew suddenly cheerful, for the idea pleased her. “I should like to make him miserable a little, after the way he has treated me, and I could do it so splendidly. But I suppose he was rather miserable when I was engaged to Eustace, and it would be distinctly hard on the other man. I never thought I was such a wretch,” with a repentant sigh, “but it was a temptation for the moment. And to think that I should be going on in this way when I ought to remember nothing but that Dick's alive! I'm a perfect beast, and I *will* be glad. I'll try and think only of Georgie, and perhaps I shan't feel quite so miserable then. Oh dear, I wish there was some way of letting people know you were sorry without giving in!”

No such paradox offered itself, however, and suddenly remembering her duty, Mabel went to give Dick the message Fitz had brought from the men. A short time afterwards they filed into the courtyard, first the half who were off duty, and then those from the walls, who came as soon as they were

relieved. On all of them Dick impressed his absolute command that the enemy should not be in any way informed of his return. The men were disappointed, for they had looked forward to publishing the tidings in one of those contests of scurrility in which they engaged at every opportunity, sometimes with the invisible defenders of General Keeling's house, and sometimes with the rash spirits who crept up under the ramparts at night, risking their lives for the sole delight of taunting the garrison. But Dick's word was law, and the Ressaldars assured him that nothing should leak out to give the enemy an inkling of what had happened. When they had retired, and the guards had been set for the night, a festal gathering took place in the inner courtyard. Georgia was carried into the verandah, and Mr and Mrs Hardy and Mabel and Flora brought out all the seats they could muster, and placed them round her couch; Colonel Graham, the doctor and Fitz came in, and Dick related his adventures.

"There really is awfully little to tell," he said, "because, you see, I was knocked silly at once, and I can only remember one moment in a whole long time. I suppose it was the evening of the fight in the Pass. I was being carried along by a lot of native women—at least, that is how I interpret the thing now, but at the moment I couldn't tell what to make of it. It might have been rather weird if I had had time to think of that, but no sooner had I opened my eyes than the woman who was holding my feet saw that I was looking at her. She screamed and let me drop—that she might put on her veil, I suppose—but that finished me for the

moment. I don't remember anything more until I found myself in a cave, with an old *fakir* sitting a little way off, absorbed in meditation. I was too weak to talk, and I seem to have had visions of the cave and the old man, off and on, for hundreds of years. At last, when I had been sensible rather longer than usual, I managed to get out sufficient voice to ask him where I was. He told me I was in his cave, which was not much information, but I couldn't think of anything else to ask him at the time. The next day I asked him how I had got there, and he said the Hasrat Ali Begum had sent and asked him to take care of me, and I had been let down into the cave by ropes from above. He evidently believed in letting his patients severely alone, for he pursued his meditations assiduously except when I worried him with my impertinent questions. I couldn't think how I came to be there, and I hammered at him until he let out the truth. I daresay he was wiser not to tell me before, for as soon as the whole thing flashed upon me, I was mad to get away. You see, the old chap was so very holy that he had no disciples and never went out into the world, and even his food was brought to an appointed place by his admirers, and left there for him to fetch. He knew about the fight in the Pass, but he couldn't say whether any of the escort had escaped, or whether this place had been taken by surprise and everybody wiped out. You may imagine the state I was in, and the threats and prayers and promises I lavished upon the old man, until he was at his wits' end to know what to do with me. He preached me a long sermon one day

upon patience and resignation, pointing out, first, that I must not think he bore me ill-will—quite the contrary, since I had saved him from being hung for murder in a very hard-sworn case when I first came here; second, that if he departed from his usual custom so far as to go out and ask the news, suspicion would immediately be excited, and I should be done for; third, that it was not he that was keeping me there, but the wounds I had got, which prevented me from moving.”

“I should think so!” cried Dr Tighe, unable to keep silence longer. “Ladies and gentlemen, the patient before you was as good as dead, ought by rights to be dead now, yet there he sits and talks. Will you think of it, Mrs North? This husband of yours has had a bullet actually through his heart. He’s a living miracle. The difference of the minutest fraction of an inch of space, the minutest fraction of a second of time, would have meant that you would be a widow at this moment. How it is you are not, I cannot explain I tell you frankly. Though it may seem to the vulgar mind to reflect upon our common profession, I imagine that being let absolutely alone may have had something to do with it, but I can’t tell. Be thankful that you’ve got him back, and take good care of him in future.”

“I will; I will, indeed,” said Georgia fervently, squeezing Dick’s hand.

“I regard you with an evil eye, Major, I don’t deny it,” went on the doctor. “You’re a living falsification of every canon of surgery. You had no business to survive that wound, much less to live through the absence of treatment you met with. It’s a slap

in Mrs North's face, I call it, to say nothing of mine. But let us hear some more of your reprehensible proceedings."

"Well," said Dick, "I remember that sermon very well, because I was panting the whole time to get away. I thought that some day when old Faiz-Ullah was saying his prayers, I might crawl past him, and slip out. I did manage to crawl to the entrance, though I thought I should have died in doing it, but when I got there I found only a precipice in front. At the side was a rope-ladder by which my elderly friend was accustomed to get to the spot where his food was left, but of course I could as soon have flown as climbed it. I simply lay there like a log, until the old fellow happened to miss me, and came to look. I must have got a touch of fever or sunstroke, for I had awful nightmares after that—oh, horrors and tortures beyond conception! Faiz-Ullah must have been frightened, for at last he made me understand that he had seen the Begum's servant, and she was going to try and bring my wife to cure me. That set me off on a new tack. The horrors went on just the same, but Georgia was always there, on the other side of a gulf, and I couldn't get at her. She knows how much I wanted her"—he stole a glance at Georgia, down whose face the tears were streaming—"but I don't think any one else can ever guess how bad it was. Well, she didn't come, as you know, but the old woman who had tried to fetch her sent me a message, which I suppose she took the trouble to invent, just to satisfy me. If I insisted upon it, Georgia would come, she said, but to reach me she must

run the gauntlet of so many dangers that it was scarcely possible she could get through. Was she to come? I'm thankful to remember that I had strength of mind enough to say she wasn't to think of it. Of course she couldn't get the message, but a man doesn't like to feel——"

"Oh, Dick, as if I should have thought of the danger!" murmured Georgia.

"We know you didn't, Mrs North," said Colonel Graham, "and that's why I agree with North that it's a good thing he left off calling you."

"I don't know why," said Dick, "but after that I was happier, somehow. I used to have the idea that Georgia was there, and we held long conversations"—Georgia's eyes met Mabel's significantly—"and so I grew better. Of course I was wild to get away, but there was always that rope-ladder, and the very thought of it turned me sick. Old Faiz-Ullah promised faithfully that in a few days he would help me up it, and escort me through the mountains to this place, so that I might get in if I could, and three nights ago he went to meet the Begum's servant when she brought the food, intending to ask if they could find me a pony. But that night there was the worst earthquake I have ever felt"—the rest exchanged glances—"and he never came back. The noise was fearful, and as shock after shock came, I never for a moment expected to live through it. But the cave was not damaged, and when I crawled out in the morning, the rope-ladder was still there. I waited for the old man, but he did not come, and there was no food left. At last I decided that

something must have happened to him, and I determined to make the attempt sooner than starve to death. I don't know how long I hung between heaven and earth on that awful ladder, but I got to the top at last, and followed Faiz-Ullah's track. Before very long I found him, poor old fellow! crushed under a fallen rock, quite dead. I hunted about for some stones that I could lift to put over him, to keep off the leopards, and then I started. If any food had been brought the night before, it was buried under the rock with him, so I had no time to lose. I knew roughly where I was, and I set my course as best I could by the sun. I went from hiding-place to hiding-place, sometimes crawling, and sometimes able to walk. I dared not rest long anywhere, for I knew I should starve even if the enemy didn't find me. I got across the Akrab Pass almost by a miracle. Bahram Khan was holding a *jirgah* with the tribesmen, and they had no scouts out except in the direction of Nalapur. After taking a good look at them, I crept round below and got through. And after that I went on somehow, I don't remember how; and at last I worked round by our house, and into the hills where the canal comes from, and got across on a landslip, where the water was shallow, and here I am."

"When you ought to be in bed," said Dr Tighe. "You don't deserve it, after your outrageous behaviour in defying the profession, but I'd like to overhaul you, and see if nature hasn't left any little crevices that art may manage to patch up."

"Art must go to work quickly, then," said Dick.

"I want to get hold of the tribes before Bahram Khan comes back."

"That will be to-morrow morning, when the armistice ends," said Colonel Graham. "No, we have got you again now, North, and you won't start out on any fools' errands just yet, let me tell you."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FIRE ON THE HILL.

“AH!” said Colonel Graham sharply. “So that is the little dodge, is it?”

He and Dick were standing in one of the gateway turrets as the day broke, and it was the sight of a long column of men marching into the town from the north-east that had called forth the exclamation.

“Look behind you!” said Dick laconically. A second force was moving along the south bank of the canal in the direction of the fort.

“Nice use to make of an armistice!” said the Colonel.

“Well, you didn’t expect anything else, did you? You see they have got us between two fires? That means a simultaneous attack on the gateway and the breastwork, at any rate, if not on all four sides at once. We have no time to lose.”

“Have you any suggestions to offer?” The Colonel spoke with the calmness of despair, and Dick glanced at him in surprise.

“Of course you know our possibilities better than I do, but I should certainly occupy Gun Hill, so as both to cover our west face, and enable

us to deliver a flank attack on the fellows on the opposite bank if they come any nearer."

"We have no guns, unfortunately, as you know, and worse than that, we have not men enough to send out a detachment to the hill and hold the place at the same time. Look there!" he handed Dick his field-glass. "The buildings facing us are packed with men ready to advance in response to any movement on our part."

"I see. But at any rate we can line the earth-work and the roofs and our bank of the canal with sharpshooters, and keep the enemy at a distance on the south face?"

"No doubt we could, but for one thing. Do you recollect that we have now been besieged over a month? What is the natural corollary?"

"That the ammunition is running out?"

"Exactly. There is so little left for the rifles that I have forbidden it to be used except for picking off any specially troublesome snipers. We are slightly better off as regards the carbines, but a single day of hard fighting would leave us with nothing but cold steel."

"Good heavens!" said Dick, beginning to pace backwards and forwards in the narrow limits of the turret; "and with the men they are bringing up now they can overwhelm us by sheer weight of numbers. You see it's the Nalapur army that is marching in? No doubt Bahram Khan was on his way to fetch it when I saw him in the Pass. Now, either the Amir has been got rid of, or he has decided to throw in his lot with his precious nephew. If he's dead, it's all up, but if not, there's just a chance. You said he seemed

to turn reckless when he thought he had done for me; well, I may be able to sober him down again."

"You are not thinking of venturing into their camp?"

"Scarcely, since Bahram Khan would very soon repair his unfortunate omission if I did. But if he doesn't propose a parley, you must, and insist on the Amir's taking part in it. Then I will show myself suddenly, and see whether there's any hope of working upon the old man's feelings."

All morning the garrison watched in gloomy helplessness the assembling of the force which was to crush them. When Bahram Khan's reinforcements had taken up their positions, the fort was practically surrounded. On the north-west, and extending under cover of the trees to the reconstructed bridge, were the tents of the tribes, now once more fully occupied, and humming like a hive of bees. Clearly, the news had gone out that victory was at hand. On the north and east was the town, now held by a strong contingent of Nalapuris, in addition to Bahram Khan's original force, and on the south the main body of the Nalapur army in a roughly fortified camp. Famine and pestilence had proved too slow in their work, and the final arbitrament was to be sharp and short.

In the course of the afternoon a white flag was hoisted on General Keeling's house, and when the garrison had replied to it, Bahram Khan rode out on the cleared space, surrounded by his own guard and the Nalapuri officers. Colonel Graham and Mr Burchard faced him at the loophole of the turret, Dick lurking in the shadows behind them,

and received what was announced as a final offer of terms. Stripped of the verbiage in which it was enwrapped, this was simply a demand for unconditional surrender. Bahram Khan would do his best to save the lives of the garrison, but the fury of the Amir was so great that he could not guarantee even that, and every shred of public and personal property was to be relinquished. Colonel Graham returned a prompt refusal. To propose a surrender was preposterous, unless the besiegers were prepared to guarantee the lives of all in the fort. Upon this Bahram Khan sent a messenger back into his own lines, ostensibly to consult the wishes of the Amir, and when he returned, announced joyfully that the stipulation was accepted. The instant and obvious retort was that the Amir must show himself in person, and swear to observe the conditions, if the thought of capitulation was to be entertained; but to this Bahram Khan demurred for a long time, displaying a singular fertility of excuse. The Amir was ill, he was resting, he had sworn not to exchange another word with an Englishman who was not his prisoner, he was in such a frenzied state that to insist upon his appearance would probably goad him to order a general massacre forthwith. Colonel Graham pointed out politely that since the besieged were still under the protection of their own walls and weapons, there was no immediate fear of such a contingency, and at last Bahram Khan himself withdrew into the town, in order, as he explained, to lavish all his entreaties upon his uncle, and persuade him to appear.

Presently a state palanquin was seen approaching,

borne by sixteen men, who carried it out upon the cleared space, and set it down.

“What’s this?” murmured Dick. “Ashraf Ali in a *palki*? I’ve never seen him in one in my life.”

Bahram Khan, who had ridden in advance of the palanquin, now dismounted, and approaching it with extreme deference, raised the heavy gold-embroidered curtain at the side. Those in the turret strained their eyes to pierce the dimness within, and made out with some difficulty the figure of the white-bearded ruler, sitting motionless, as though absorbed in meditation.

“He’s stupefied!” came in a fierce whisper from Dick. “They’ve given him opium or something of the sort.”

Colonel Graham addressed the Amir politely, but no answer was vouchsafed. It was Bahram Khan who replied for him, in the silkiest of tones.

“The Amir Sahib refuses to look upon the sahibs, or to listen to their words, until they have surrendered to him.”

“Oh does he?” said Dick, and he stepped forward between Colonel Graham and the Commissioner, and showed himself at the loophole.

“Amir Sahib, do you know my voice?” he cried.

An electric shock seemed to pass through the inanimate form in the palanquin. “Is that the voice of Nāth Sahib?” was asked, in high, quavering tones. “Then can this most unhappy one die in peace.”

“Do you guarantee our safety, Amir Sahib?” asked Dick.

“Trust them not,” came back the answer. “See

how they treat me !” and the old man rose as though to step out of the palanquin. There were chains on his wrists and ankles. The next moment Bahram Khan and his followers, recovering from their surprise, had thrown themselves upon him and forced him back, and the palanquin was immediately carried away.

“ Well, after this, I think even Bahram Khan must feel that the capitulation idea has been knocked on the head,” said Dick. “ Now everything depends on whether they attack us at once.”

“ Isn’t that a rather obvious remark ? ” asked Mr Burgrave drily.

“ Ah, you don’t see my point,” said Dick, without taking offence. “ I think Colonel Graham will agree with me that since Bahram Khan has thrown off the mask, and made himself master of Nalapur, it shows he is determined to crush us at once. Evidently the relieving column is on its way, or famine might have been left to do the work.”

“ I see what you mean,” said Colonel Graham. “ If he attacks at once, it means that relief is close at hand, but if he gives his men a night’s rest, the column is still far enough off for him to take things easily.”

“ That’s it. Well, since he’s so bent on putting the blame on his uncle, it’s clear that he means to come the injured innocent over our men when they get up. We here know too much now to be allowed to escape, but the order for massacring us must be given by the Amir, who will be murdered by his virtuously indignant nephew as soon as it has been carried out. We are safe just so long as we can hold out, and the

Amir is safe while we are. That's the situation. Now if we are left in peace for to-night, I mean to get through and hurry up the relieving column."

"I thought so," said the Colonel, "and I mean you to do nothing of the kind. Why, man, you couldn't walk a mile in the state you are in. You ought to be in hospital now. We have no medical comforts left to feed you up with, but at least we can see that you have a rest."

"I shall get on somehow. I don't mind telling you that I have designs on the tribes on my way. We have eaten each other's salt, and they won't hurt me."

"Possibly not, but they would stop you, and Bahram Khan would soon find a way of getting you out of their hands. I won't let you go on any such fool's errand."

"I think the civil and the political power will have to combine against the military," said Dick, turning to the Commissioner, who had stood by with a "Settle it between yourselves" air. "What do you think?"

"As a military man yourself, you are hardly the person to organise such a revolt," was the reply, "and I am debarred from it by the delegation of authority to which I agreed at the beginning of the siege." The tone was abrupt, and Dick and Colonel Graham glanced at one another in surprise, but the Commissioner went on, "If the decision lay in my hands, I should absolutely forbid your going. Your wife may at least claim to be spared useless torture, and you can't expect to get the V.C. twice over."

"I am glad you agree with me," said the Colonel

heartily, ignoring the stiffness of the tone. "Consider yourself sat upon, North."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Fitz, coming up the steps and addressing the Colonel, "but there's a queer light to the westward, which doesn't seem like the sunset. We thought it might possibly be a signal."

Colonel Graham wheeled round sharply. "No, it's certainly not the sunset," he said, looking through the doorway which led on to the ramparts. "Somewhere behind Gun Hill on the south-west, I should say. What do you think of looking at it from the broken tower?" to the Commissioner. "You come too, North."

"What in the world are Papa and the Major and Mr Burgrave climbing up there for?" demanded Flora, a few minutes later. She was sitting with the other inmates of the Memsahibs' courtyard in Georgia's verandah—such part of it as had survived the earthquake—watching the sunset, and it was natural that the acrobatic feats necessary for reaching the top of the south-west tower should catch her eye at once.

"They are gone to look at some sort of fire that there seems to be in the hills," said Fitz, who came in just then.

"A fire? Oh, perhaps——" Flora stopped suddenly, for Mr Hardy had sprung up from his chair in wild excitement.

"A fire?" he cried. "Nicodemus!" and rushed out of the courtyard.

"Is Mr Hardy beginning to swear?" asked Mabel,

in an awed voice, of the rest, but even Mrs Hardy was too much astonished to rebuke her.

“ He’ll kill himself ! ” she murmured, as she saw her husband mounting the broken steps that led up to the tower.

“ Why, Padri, what’s the matter ? ” asked Colonel Graham, turning round to see the old missionary toiling after him. “ Take my hand across here.”

“ I am so sorry—I can never forgive myself—it quite slipped my memory,” panted Mr Hardy. “ It was a *Malik* from one of the tribes to the southwest—he came to me secretly—to ask about Christianity—I called him Nicodemus to myself. The night the siege began—he came to warn me—and promised to light a fire in the hills—when relief was at hand. I was so busy hurrying the Christians into the fort, and helping them to save their possessions, that I never remembered the matter again.”

“ Well, it doesn’t signify so much, since you have remembered it now,” said the Colonel kindly. “ Did the man seem to you trustworthy ? ”

“ He took his life in his hand to warn me that night, and of course when he came before he risked losing everything. His name was Hasrat Isa, curiously enough, and he seemed to me to be genuinely in earnest.”

“ Thanks, Padri. You have brought us the best news we could desire. We must manage to hold out now.”

“ This settles it,” muttered Dick. “ Can I have a word or two with you ? ” he asked of the Commissioner, and they moved across to the other side

of the tower, Mr Burgrave's face wearing an absolutely non-committal expression.

"You see how it is?" said Dick. "This gives me just the pull I wanted over the tribes. Of course the one thing now is to detach them from Bahram Khan before our men come up, and to save the Amir. They know me and trust me, and if I assure them that an overwhelming force is close at hand, I believe they will be ready to lay down their arms. Of course they will have to give up all their loot and to pay a fine of rifles, but they know enough of us by this time to prefer that to a war of extermination. Then about the Amir. He's safe for the present, as I said, but I haven't a doubt his guards have got orders to kill him when the head of the column appears, if we are still holding out then. I shall try to get the tribes to rescue him. But now for the crux of the whole thing. If I am to have the faintest hope of success, I must be able to tell the tribes that we mean to hold on to Nalapur when the rising is put down. Otherwise as soon as Bahram Khan has made terms he will establish himself in his uncle's place, and wipe out all who submitted before him. Have I a free hand to do it?"

"Why consult me?" asked the Commissioner coldly.

"Because it depends upon you. The announcement of our intended withdrawal has never been actually made, thanks to the ambush on the road to the durbar, and it rests with you to withhold it altogether. Of course I know I'm inviting you to reverse your policy, and all that sort of thing, but I

don't believe you're the man to weigh that against the peace of the frontier."

"Are you aware that I came to Khemistan for the express purpose of carrying out the policy you invite me to reverse?"

"Yes, and I know it means you will probably have to resign, and will certainly get the cold shoulder at Simla. But I call upon you to do it, just as I am staking everything myself—and I have a wife and child. It will prevent no one knows how much bloodshed, the desolation of hundreds of miles of country, and years of unrest and bitter feeling, for the Government can't press things against the opinion, not only of the man on the spot, but of their own official converted by observation of the facts. They will shunt us—that's only to be expected—but it will save the frontier."

"You are right, and it must be done. You are at liberty to tell the tribes that I throw all my influence on the side of maintaining the treaty with Nalapur."

"Thanks. If anything happens to me, look after my wife and the boy."

The trust was the seal of the newly-born friendliness between them, and Mr Burggrave felt it so. "God knows," he said, with more emotion than Dick had seen him display before, "I wish I could risk my life as you are doing, but at least I'll do what I can."

Without another word, Dick crossed to the spot where Colonel Graham was standing, still examining the distant glare through his field-glass.

"Our friend Nicodemus has gone to work very

shrewdly," he said, as Dick came up. "I should say that his signal is absolutely invisible to any one on the plain. We only see it because we are so high up."

"So much the better," said Dick. "I suppose you've guessed what our plotting was about, Colonel? I have my plans all cut and dried by this time, and with the civil and the political power both against you, you'll have to let me go. Assuming that there won't be any attack till dawn, I shall take Anstruther with me, and creep out as soon as it's really dark. He must go across the hills and hunt for the relief column, and guide it here when he has found it, and I shall set to work to palaver the tribes."

"They'll shoot you at sight," groaned the Colonel.

"I hope not. At any rate, for argument's sake, we'll take it that they don't. Of course my dodge will be to get them to delay the attack by insisting beforehand on an impossible proportion of loot. While their messengers and Bahram Khan's are going to and fro, Anstruther, knowing the ground, ought to be able to bring up the column. When I see his signal, the tribes will hasten to make graceful concessions, and Bahram Khan will order the attack. While he is occupied at the front, a few of the tribesmen and I will make a dash for the Amir, and the column will get its guns into position. Then, if all goes well, a grand transformation scene. The guns plump a shell or two into the advancing ranks, the Sikhs and Gurkhas, and possibly a British regiment, make their appearance on the heights, the tribesmen turn their rifles against their own side, and the

Amir shows himself and orders his revolted army to surrender. If they won't, their blood will be upon their own heads, as they'll soon see, but I think only Bahram Khan and a few irreconcilables will refuse."

"And you?" demanded the Colonel. "Your programme doesn't provide for your being killed a dozen times over, does it? What will Mrs North say when she hears what you think of doing?"

"She will tell me to go. The tribes are as much her people as mine—more so, indeed. I am going to tell her now."

He clambered down the ruined staircase, found Fitz, and told him briefly what he wanted of him, and then went to Georgia's room, where he set himself to catch her with guile—a process which, as he ought to have known, had not the faintest chance of success.

"Do you remember the last time I went away, Georgie?" he asked, as he sat down beside her.

Georgie looked up at him with a thrill of alarm. "Do you think I could ever forget it, Dick? Not if I lived for hundreds of years."

"We almost quarrelled, didn't we? You were in the right, of course—I knew it all along, but I had to go. You don't like me to go out treaty-breaking, do you?"

"No." Her voice was almost inaudible.

"But it's all right if I go treaty-making, isn't it? just to get the tribes to feel what fools they've been, and make them see reason?"

"Oh, Dick, must you go? so soon? and you have been away so long!"

“ You jump at things so suddenly,” lamented Dick. “ I wanted to break it gently to you.”

“ My dear stupid boy, do you think I don't know your way of breaking things gently yet? ”

“ Well, anyhow, you'll let me go, won't you? without making a fuss, I mean? ”

“ A fuss! Do I ever make a fuss? ”

“ Oh, you know what I mean—without making me feel a brute for doing it? ”

“ You know I would never keep you back from what was really your duty.”

“ That's all right, then,” Dick failed to notice the distinction thus delicately implied. “ And I'm going to try and save all your father's work from being ruined, so it must be my duty, mustn't it? ”

“ I suppose so. And I am forbidden to make a fuss? ”

“ Oh yes, please, absolutely—unless it would comfort you awfully to do it.”

“ It wouldn't comfort you. That's what I have to think of. When do you start, Dick? ”

“ In an hour or so—as soon as it's properly dark.”

“ Then there's plenty of time. I should so like the boy to be baptized before you go.”

“ Why not? I suppose the Padri won't kick at the shortness of the notice? Georgie, will you be very much surprised? I should like to ask Burgrave to be godfather.”

“ Dick!” Georgia's tone was full of dismay. “ I thought of Colonel Graham—” Dick nodded approval—“ and either Fitz Anstruther or Dr Tighe——”

“ I'd rather have Burgrave, if you don't mind. He has come out strong to-night. I respect him

more than any man I know. In his place I don't believe I could have made the sacrifice he's prepared to make."

"Then we will have him, of course. But Mabel is the godmother, naturally. Won't she feel it awkward? You know they have quarrelled?"

"That's putting it mildly. I'm afraid it's quite off."

"Ah, that's what I was afraid of, too, but Mabel always refuses to discuss the subject with me until I am stronger. I can't force her confidence, you know."

"I suppose not, but there's no need to be so awfully careful of her feelings. She has treated Burgrave shamefully, and so far as I can see, without the slightest excuse. She insists on engaging herself to him, and then she goes and breaks it off for no reason whatever. I'm disgusted with her."

"Oh, Dick, don't be unkind to her! If she didn't care for him it was only right to break it off. I told you she was miserable about it."

"Then she had no business to begin it. But don't let us waste time over her nonsense, Georgie. Shall I go and speak to the Padri?" He opened the door, and stepped out on the verandah. "Why, Anstruther, you here? It's not nearly dark enough to start yet."

Fitz smothered an exclamation of impatience. This was the second time he had been foiled in half-an-hour in an attempt to get a few words with Mabel. He had succeeded in catching her alone for a moment immediately after Dick had told him of the adventure in which he was to take part, and then

Flora came and called her away, because the baby was breathing heavily in its sleep, and she was afraid something was wrong with it. On this occasion he had got hold of Flora herself, wasting no time in preliminaries.

“ Oh, I say, Miss Graham, could you manage to get Mabel here without telling her that I want to see her? I must speak to her before I go. I’m certain she cares for me a little, but she was so determined I should not see it that I couldn’t insult her by letting on that I did. But there’s no time now for any more fooling. I must tell her what I have to say, and there’s an end of it.”

“ Now, why couldn’t you have said that before? ” demanded Flora. “ That’s the right way to take her. I’ll have her here in a moment,” and even now she was beguiling her out on the verandah when Dick appeared to announce that the baptism was to take place at once, and Fitz’s hopes were again disappointed. There would be no chance of speaking to Mabel now for some time, and he left the courtyard and joined Winlock on the broken tower, where he was keeping a solitary watch in case the relieving force should attempt to communicate with the fort by means of flash-light signals. Their eyes, strained with staring into the darkness, showed them lights at every possible and impossible point in the more distant hills, until at last they abandoned the tantalising prospect, and talked in whispers of the expected relief.

“ To think that by this time to-morrow we may have had a good square meal! ” sighed Winlock.

“ Beef, not horse,” murmured Fitz sympathetically.

“And tinned things—though I shall always feel a delicacy about tins in future. They’ve been ‘medical comforts, strictly reserved for the sick,’ such a long time.”

“And real bread, instead of this abominable bran mash.”

“And as much to drink as ever you want—and soap—and baths—” He stopped suddenly, for Fitz had caught him by the arm. “What is it?” he whispered.

“I’m sure I heard a noise down below. Help me to move this sand-bag.”

The sand-bag on the parapet was pushed aside, and Fitz put his head through the gap thus left, but only just far enough to see over the edge, lest he should be visible against the sky. It was clear that the enemy were keeping high festival in all their camps, for the air was full of the sound of tomtoms and similar instruments, and snatches of wild song. To Winlock it seemed impossible to detect any noise less insistent or nearer at hand, but Fitz looked and listened until his friend hauled him back.

“Well, is there anything?” he demanded impatiently.

“I’m almost certain there is. You take a look!”

“I’m not a cat,” whispered Winlock in disgust, when he had drawn his head back in his turn.

“Can’t see a thing.”

“Well, I am, rather, in that way, and I believe there’s a fellow down there.”

Again he put his head into the opening, and supporting his face on his hands, concentrated all his attention on the foot of the wall. After several

minutes, which seemed like hours to Winlock, he faced him again.

“ There is a man down there, and his clothes are dark, so as not to show. He has put two bags against the wall, and he has crawled away to fetch another.”

“ Going to blow down the tower ? ”

“ Yes, it’s their best chance. Half gone already, you see. Well, will you clear the men off the near half of the wall, and tell the Colonel, so as to be ready for developments ? I’m going to nip the villain in the bud.”

“ Nonsense, he’ll knife you ! And how will you get down ? ”

“ Climb down the broken brickwork and drop.” He drew off his boots. “ I shall take him by surprise. Don’t let any one fire, whatever you do. It would explode the powder at once. Be off.”

Winlock obeyed, and hurried to alarm the Colonel, after hastily calling down the sentries, the noise of whose own footsteps effectually prevented their noticing any suspicious sound. Richard St George Keeling had just received his name, and was accepting the congratulations of the representatives of the regiment on the auspicious event with his usual composure, when Winlock came into the courtyard and drew Colonel Graham aside. Before he could utter a word, however, there was an explosion which seemed to shake the very foundations of the fort, followed by the collapse of various portions of the newly-repaired defences.

“ I’m afraid the wall’s gone, sir,” gasped Winlock, when he recovered himself.

“ Not a bit of it,” said the Colonel, pointing to the

dark line above the roofs ; but before anything more could be said, the sentry on the north-west tower gave the alarm. There was no time for anything but a rush to the walls, which were only reached just as a hurrying mob of men, some carrying torches, others scaling-ladders, advanced in wild confusion, shouting and singing, from the shelter of the plane trees. A couple of volleys sent them flying back in headlong rout, and beyond a shot or two from General Keeling's house there was no semblance of an attack on any other side of the fort. The officers gathered on the rampart looked at one another in complete mystification.

"I never remember a worse-planned attack," said Colonel Graham. "In fact there was no plan about it. And yet the explosion——"

"Yes, but how came it to do so little damage?" said Dick. Some additional masses of brickwork had been torn from the tower, and the sand-bags were flung about, but the wall was comparatively uninjured.

"Probably the powder became ignited before it was properly placed in position," suggested Mr Burgrave. "If the man in charge intended to use a slow match, the attack may only have been planned for dawn, so that the various parties were naturally not prepared. This fiasco here was a kind of drunken forlorn hope, started simply by the noise of the explosion."

"Yes, but why should the powder get ignited? Why, Winlock!" The young man had made his appearance with his arms full of rope.

"I want to go down and look for Anstruther, sir.

He must be awfully hurt, for he was going to try and stop the explosion."

Half-an-hour later Mabel and Flora, waiting anxiously in the verandah to learn the result of the attack, heard in the passage the slow tread of a body of men carrying something. Dick was at their head.

"We'll bring him in here, as the hospital is full," he was saying. "As I shall be away, there'll be the room I had last night to spare, and the ladies will help to look after him."

"Who is it? What has happened?" asked the two girls together.

"Poor old Anstruther has got himself blown up instead of the fort," returned Dick. "Take care of that corner, Woodworth."

"What is the matter with him? Is he badly hurt?" asked Mabel hoarsely.

"Can't say yet, On second thoughts, Colonel, I'll take Winlock, if you can spare him. He knows the country round here so much better than Beltring."

"Dick, are you absolutely heartless?" Mabel grasped her brother's arm, and shook him. "Is he dying?"

"How can I tell? He was just alive when we found him."

"I must be with him. I will nurse him," she managed to say.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. It's no sight for you, and we don't want fainting and hysterics. For Heaven's sake, Mabel, don't make a scene!" he

added, in a whisper of angry disgust. "It's not as if he was anything to you."

"I have a right——" she began with difficulty.

"Keep her away, Burgrave," said Dick curtly, turning his head for a moment, and the Commissioner drew her hand within his arm, and led her in silence to the other side of the courtyard. In the tumult of her anger and mortification, she struggled furiously at first, but he declined to release her, and presently she found herself deposited in a chair, with Mr Burgrave standing over her like a gaoler. Between her sobs she could hear him talking, apparently with the charitable intention of at once comforting her for her exclusion and assuring her that the cause of her emotion remained unsuspected.

"Anxious to be of use—highly delicate nervous organisation—might distract the doctor's attention at a critical moment—your brother meant kindly——" were some of the scraps that reached her ears.

"It's not that!" she cried wildly. "He'll die without my seeing him, and Dick says he's nothing to me, and—and he's everything!" and her sobs died away into low, hopeless weeping, which wrung the heart of the man before her. She did not think of him until she felt an unsteady touch on her hair, and looking up at him, saw that not only his hands but his very lips were trembling.

"Don't cry so," he said hoarsely; "you break my heart. Then you are engaged to him? I never dreamt of this."

"No, I'm not—but it's my own fault. He asked me long ago—and I told him it could never be—and I was so horrid that—he never asked me again.

And now they won't let me go to him—and I wanted—just to tell him—before he died—that—that——”

“That he might die happy? No, no, I am in earnest,” as Mabel threw him a glance of reproach. “I could die happy in his case.”

“Oh, how wicked—how mean—I am, to say all this to you! And I have treated you so badly—What can you think of me?”

“What should I think but that you are the woman I hoped to shield from every breath of trouble, and now you are in this sorrow, and I can do nothing?”

“Oh, but you can!” cried Mabel impulsively. “It's no good speaking to Dick, but Dr Tighe will listen to you, and you can ask him to let me help to nurse him.”

“I have no doubt he will be willing to do that—or if it is not possible, I am sure he will promise to call you if any change for the worse occurs.”

“Oh, you won't believe in me even now! You don't think I could be brave even for him. If it was to do him good, I could——”

“Your seeing him now could do him no possible good, and the sight would haunt you for ever. I think you don't quite trust me, do you? Try to think of me as a friend, as one who would a thousand times rather see you happy with the man you loved than unhappy with himself. And perhaps”—he hesitated a little—“you may like to know that you have lifted a weight from my mind to-night. I confess it seemed to me a cruel thing when you broke off our engagement without any special reason, but now I know that you love some one else, I feel it was quite natural and right.”

Mabel saw his meaning dimly. The sting of her treatment of him had lain in the feeling that though there was no one else she preferred, she valued so lightly the love he offered that she refused even to tolerate it. Now his self-respect was restored. It was for a tangible rival, not for freedom in the abstract, that she had cast him off.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ABDICATION.

“ MAB, are you awake ? ”

“ Go away, I hate you ! ” was the muffled reply. Mabel had thrown herself, dressed, upon her bed, and her face was buried in the pillow. She shook off Flora’s hand angrily from her shoulder as she spoke.

“ Why, Mab, I only wanted to tell you— What have I done ? ”

Mabel sat up and pushed back her hair. “ They let you go and help with him,” she said venomously, “ and they kept me out. Dick called you—I heard him myself. And they wouldn’t let me come. Eustace held my hands. And you went—and helped them.”

“ I didn’t do anything but hold things for them, really. Dr Tighe did it all, and your brother helped him. I had to go when they called me.”

“ Did he look at you—recognise you ? If he did, I’ll never forgive you.”

“ No, not a bit. But, Mab——”

“ I’m glad of that, at any rate. And you came to say I might go to him now ? ”

“ Yes, Mr Burgrave spoke to Dr Tighe. But don’t say you’re glad he didn’t look at me. It will make

you miserable all your life to have even thought it."

"Why, what is the matter?" asked Mabel impatiently, as Flora barred her way to the door.

"I can't let you go into the room without realising it. His—his hair is all burnt off, Mab, and he's fearfully scorched. You can't see anything but bandages, and he is quite insensible."

"It's only the shock. He must come round soon."

"That's not all. I must tell you. The explosion seems to have paralysed all his faculties. He is deaf and dumb and blind—for the time."

"Oh, for the time, of course. But he won't be deaf when I speak to him. Don't keep me here, Flora. I want to wake him."

Flora drew back reluctantly, and Mabel ran across the courtyard. At the door of the sick-room, which was a makeshift structure erected since the earthquake at the corner where two verandahs joined, she met Dr Tighe.

"So I hear you want to play at nursing a little, Miss North?" he said, not unkindly, but by no means as if he regarded her intention as serious. "Do you think you won't fall asleep? Can you keep cool, whatever happens? Not that you could do much harm if you went into hysterics," he added, half to himself. "The poor fellow wouldn't be disturbed."

Even this slighting estimate of her powers did not provoke Mabel to protest. "What have I to do?" she asked, with determined calmness, and the doctor looked at her curiously.

"I want you to sit beside him and watch for any

sound or movement. If there is the least change, send for me at once. I must spend the night over at the hospital, but I am leaving my boy in the verandah here, and he will fetch me whenever you want me."

"Wait, please. May I speak to him?"

"Who—the boy? Oh, the patient. Yes, of course, as much as you like, if it will ease your mind. Didn't I tell you that he couldn't hear you?" He glanced sharply at her, but she turned away from him, and went into the room without saying anything, leaving him puzzled. "I feel a bit of a brute," he said to himself, as he crossed to the passage leading into the hospital, "but she must keep up. I don't want her on my hands in hysterics, in addition to all the rest."

Mabel sat down quietly beside the bed. A smoky native lamp shed a flickering light through the little room, rendering dimly visible the swathed figure which lay absolutely motionless in its shroud of bandages. Of the face nothing could be seen, and the bandaged hands were stretched straight at the sides. A great terror seized Mabel. Surely he must be dead? She laid her hand timidly on the wrist nearest her, so lightly as scarcely to touch it, but the contact served to reassure her. He was still living, and she resigned herself to her silent and solitary watch.

At first she was so much absorbed in listening and looking for the sounds and movements which never came, that she had no thought of her surroundings, but after a time they forced themselves upon her notice. The deathlike silence all around, the pres-

ence of that shrouded form upon the bed, the uncertain light—all combined to strain her nerves to their utmost tension. She would have risen and walked about, in the hope of breaking the spell, but she discovered that she had no power to stir. The semi-darkness was full of shadows for which she could not account, and small mysterious noises sounded in her ears like thunder-claps. Over and over again she thought she saw her patient move, only to find that her eyes had deceived her, and the breathless expectation did but increase the strain upon her. By degrees her terror grew almost uncontrollable, but she fought against it doggedly. Never in her life had she placed such constraint upon herself. The door was so near, two steps would take her to it, and once outside she would be safe from the shadows and the silence. But she gripped her chair hard with both hands, and at last the impulse passed away. Next came the temptation to scream, to shriek, sing, do anything to break the stillness. She was shaking from head to foot; it seemed utterly impossible to check her sobs, yet she succeeded in crushing them down. The struggle was a fearful one, and she felt that her self-command would not hold out much longer. She looked at her watch, and resolved to remain quiet for five minutes, whatever happened. When the five minutes was over, she renewed the resolution for another five minutes, and so on, and the expedient was successful for a time. Then it became more and more difficult to maintain, and the periods of five minutes dwindled to four, three, and finally one. She gazed at the watch aghast. It was impossible that so much

agony and mental stress could have been crowded into one minute. But the watch had not stopped, and she gave up the conflict, and burst into tears.

"Fitz!" she wailed, dropping on her knees beside the bed. "Fitz!"

Surely he would hear. Georgia had said that Dick's voice would reach her if she were dead. But in this case there was no answer.

"Oh, Fitz, speak to me!" she entreated. "I am so frightened."

The piteous voice died away. It must have availed to pierce the silence which enwrapped him, she thought, and yet he would not speak. Could it be that he was resolved to punish her for her coldness in the past, to humble her pride in return for all she had made him suffer? Or perhaps he did not understand even yet.

"Fitz," she murmured softly, "I love you."

No sooner had the words escaped her lips than she sprang up aghast. They seemed to be echoed back by the walls, on every side, to be whispered by mocking sprites, to clang like the strokes of great bells. "I love you! I love you!" The air was full of them, and she was overwhelmed with shame.

"Oh, if you don't hate me, say just one word!" she sobbed. "I am so ashamed, but you said you loved me. Oh, Fitz, it's not like you to be so unkind! And I thought you would be glad to know."

Surely he must answer now?—but she sobbed on, and there came no word of comfort.

"Well, Miss North, and what's all this about?" said Dr Tighe.

He stood at the door, looking in at her, and Mabel

sprang to her feet and confronted him, shaking with sobs, her face stained with tears.

"It's—it's only—I was speaking to him, and he won't answer," she managed to say.

"But I told you he wouldn't. He can't. Why, he doesn't even hear you."

"I thought I could make him hear."

"As well try to wake the dead. No, no; what an idiot I am!" as she recoiled from him in terror. "Purely a figure of speech, nothing more. Now I will take a turn of watching, and do you go and get some rest."

"Oh no, I won't leave him. I am not a bit tired."

"Go to Mrs North. She can't sleep either, and she and her ayah have got some coffee for you. It will soon be daylight, and you had better rest while you can."

"As if I should think of leaving him!" repeated Mabel in scorn.

"I won't be defied by my own nurses, Miss North. If you don't go peaceably, I'll have you gently assisted out, and once outside this room you won't get in again."

"Oh, how can you be so unkind!" sobbed Mabel, breaking down abjectly.

"I am not unkind. I want you to help me a great deal with the poor fellow, and that's why I insist upon your resting now. You shall come on duty again in four hours or so, and I'll promise faithfully to call you if there's any change in the meantime."

Slowly and reluctantly Mabel left the room, and went along the verandah to Georgia's door. Georgia

was sitting up in a long cane chair, and welcomed her cheerfully.

"Come in, Mab. It seems absurdly early to be up, but I knew how cold and miserable you would feel after being awake all night. This is the very last of the coffee. Dr Tighe has lavished it upon us recklessly on the chance of our being relieved to-day, so make the most of it."

"I couldn't touch it, Georgie!" with a gesture of disgust.

"Oh yes, you can, to please me. After you have drunk it you shall lie down on my bed, and if you can't sleep, we will talk. Why, you are shivering! Put on that shawl, and now drink the coffee," and Mabel obeyed.

"Let me stay here, Georgie," she said when she had finished, sitting down on the floor, and laying her head on Georgia's knee. "I like to be close to you. You understand things." Georgia stroked her hair softly, and she went on, "Other people don't understand—even Flora, or Dr Tighe. And Dick was horrid last night. The only person who seems to know how I feel is poor Eustace—he understands."

"Yes, he has suffered himself."

"And that is my fault. But I never knew how it hurt till now, Georgie, or I couldn't have done it, and now that I do know, it's too late. I know now how you feel about Dick, because of what I feel about him. I can't bear any one else to do a single thing for him, and if he became conscious again while I was away, I should be ready to kill Dr Tighe. Isn't it strange that to-day I would give anything to hear

him say the things that made me so angry a little while ago, and that I have said things in his ear to-night that would have made him perfectly happy then, and now he can't even hear them? Oh, Georgie, if he should never hear them—if he should die without recovering his senses!”

“We can only hope—and pray,” said Georgia gently.

“I know, but you must pray—I can't. You have always been kind to him, at any rate; I haven't. I don't deserve that he should get well, I know—but I do want him so much. When I think that he has been wasting his love upon me all this time, while I was too proud to take it, I feel it would serve me right if I never had the chance of telling him how glad and thankful I am to have it. But I do love him, Georgie, indeed I do.”

“I know you do, Mab,” said Georgia, still passing her hand softly over Mabel's hair. She would not allow a word of reproach to cross her lips, but in her heart there was a little tumult of wifely indignation. Mabel was so much engrossed with Fitz Anstruther as not even to remember that her brother had taken his life in his hand and gone straight into the enemy's camp. “But it is only natural. Perhaps I should do the same in her place,” thought Georgia, and continued the pleasant restful movement. Before very long Mabel was asleep, and she was still crouched upon the floor, leaning against Georgia, when Dr Tighe came to say that she might take her second turn of watching in the sick-room. She awoke with a start, while he was talking to Georgia in an excited whisper.

“ Yes, Mrs North, I’m certain there’s something up. Two or three distinct *jirgahs* seem to be going on in the enemy’s lines, and though they began to make preparations for fighting two hours ago, they don’t get any forrarder. And we are almost certain that there’s a movement of some kind in progress at the back of Gun Hill. There may be artillery there, taking up a position, or possibly the whole relief column is preparing to occupy the heights. If it’s anything of the sort, it’s all due to that marvellous husband of yours, whom I’d make Viceroy this very hour if I had my way.”

“ And he would be excessively unhappy at Government House, and the cause of extreme misery to every one else,” laughed Georgia ; but Mabel, who had been listening to their talk half asleep, sprang up.

“ Oh, Doctor, is there any change ? Is he awake ? ”

“ No change whatever, I’m sorry to say. Have your breakfast before you come across, and then I’ll leave you in charge while I go my morning rounds in the hospital.”

Very soon Mabel was at her post again, wondering at the horror which night and silence had lent to the rough-walled, commonplace little room. The full blaze of sunlight never reached this particular corner of the courtyard until late in the afternoon, but the hole which had been left as a window admitted a certain amount of light. Through it also there came pleasantly distant sounds of life and movement from the other parts of the fort. As Mabel sat with her eyes fixed upon the bed, the murmur of different noises lulled her into a state very nearly resembling sleep, and once again she

thought she saw a movement, only to discover that it was merely fancy. Another period of intense vigilance passing gradually into semi-consciousness followed, the mere effort of concentrating her gaze on one object inclining her to slumber, and then there came a sudden awakening. Was it thunder, or another earthquake, or what could be the meaning of those tremendous crashes, each of which was welcomed by cries of delight from the walls?

"Guns, I suppose," said Mabel to herself, still half asleep. "Perhaps it will wake him." She bent forward eagerly, but there was still no movement, and she sat down again disappointed. The crashes and the shouts of joy overhead still continued, but she made no attempt to learn what was going on, not so much from reluctance to leave her post as from sheer lack of interest. Suddenly there came a different sound, a singing, shrieking noise, deepening into a groan as it came nearer. She had never heard it before, and yet she knew by instinct what it meant.

"A shell!" she cried, springing up involuntarily. However long she may live, she will never remember that moment without a blush of bitter humiliation, for she sprang up to run away. But the impulse was only momentary. Even before she could turn towards the door a rush of incredulous shame swept over her and made her throw herself on her knees by the bed. She clasped one of the bandaged hands in hers to give herself courage. "I will die with him!" she said, and burying her face in the coverlet, waited. It seemed to her that she waited for hours, and yet only the minutest fraction of time

can have elapsed between her recognition of the nature of the sound and the concussion which followed—a deafening, rending noise, which seemed to comprise within itself all imaginable sounds of terror, and which was intensified a hundredfold by the echoes it evoked from the walls of the fort. To Mabel it felt as if the world was coming to an end, and she was being buried in the ruins, but at this point she lost consciousness, and knew no more until she found Dr Tighe and Flora dashing water into her face, rubbing her hands, and using various other means to revive her. Her first impression was of a blaze of intense light, and it only dawned upon her gradually that the roof of the room and the two walls facing the courtyard were gone, their shattered fragments lying in heaps around.

“I’ll never forgive myself!” cried Dr Tighe frantically. “What business had I to be trespassing upon the walls, just to watch the practice our fellows were making, and leaving my patients to be killed without me? The moment I saw the Nalapurī horse trying to escape across the canal, and the gun on the hill turned round to cover them, I said, ‘We’ll have a shell dumped into us in another minute,’ and sure enough we had.”

“What was it, then?” asked Mabel feebly.

“Thank God you’re alive yet! ’Twas one of our own shells that fell short, and as nearly as possible wrecked the whole place. I made sure you were done for when Miss Graham and I got you out.”

“Oh, but what about him—is he safe?” cried Mabel, starting up and pushing her way into the corner where the bed stood. Its position had pro-

tected it to a wonderful extent from the falling timbers of the roof and walls, but it was covered with smaller fragments, and enveloped in a haze of dust which was only now dispersing. But Mabel cared nothing for the dust or falling plaster.

“He’s talking!” she shrieked to Dr Tighe, who followed her, stumbling over the rubbish on the floor. “Hush, oh, hush! I must hear what he says.”

Dr Tighe held his breath, and Flora quickly waved back the curious servants and others who had been attracted to the spot by the bursting of the shell, and withdrew with them out of earshot. Mabel, kneeling beside the bed, was listening hungrily to the words which poured from the patient’s lips, not spoken with any apparent difficulty, but rattled off in quick low tones.

“Awfully good job those Sikh fellows are making such a noise on the wall. I’m sure I dislodged something then, but I didn’t hear it fall. Perhaps it fell on our friend down below. Rather a startler for him, but he’ll be waiting for me. Hope he looks in the wrong place. This is the best point to drop from, I should think. Hope and trust there are no sharp bricks and things to come down upon. It’s creepy work. One, two, three, and away! So far, so good. Now to stalk our friend. If he’s trying to stalk me at the same moment, our heads will probably meet with a bang. I’ll have my knife out—revolver would be too risky. Ah—h—h—h—what’s that? The powder-bag, I’ll swear; but I thought it was the man. Now if only I knew where you are at this moment, my friend, I would drag your bags to a safe distance, and give you a nice little hunt

for them. But it would be awkward if you came on me from behind, so I'll wait here. Wonder if my eyes shine in the dark like a cat's? That would give him rather a turn; he might think it was a tiger. Hullo! back already, are you, and another lot of powder too? Now if you'll only leave it behind you, and retire gracefully for the moment, we'll whip it up over the wall in no time, and requisition it for her Majesty's service. Oh, that's it, is it? Well, you are a cool hand, I must say, to make your bed on a heap of powder-bags! But I can't stay watching you until you choose to make a move. I might sneeze, you know, so I'm afraid I must trouble you. Now then! just hand over that knife. Oh, that's your little game, is it? This is not playing fair. Firearms not allowed on any account. I say!"

There was a pause, a sigh, and the voice went on again.

"I never guessed these bricks would be so nobby. It's rather rough negotiating them without any boots. Awfully good job those Sikh fellows are making such a noise on the wall. I'm sure I dislodged something then——" Mabel lifted an agonised face to the doctor.

"He's saying the same things over again. What does it all mean?"

"He is going over the last two or three minutes before the explosion. I suppose the thoughts and impressions of that time have fixed themselves in his mind, which seems to have been set working again by the shock of the bursting shell. Very likely he will go on like this."

“What! Always?” cried Mabel, in horror.

“We’ll hope not, though I have known cases in which the effect of such a shock has been permanent. The brain seems unable ever to receive any other impression afterwards. But he can’t well go on talking at this rate long, and when he’s exhausted he may sink into a stupor, and emerge in a more rational state of mind. I wonder whether his hearing has returned? Anstruther!”

There was no answer. “You try,” said the doctor.

“Fitz!” cried Mabel, her tones sharpened by anxiety; but the low monotonous voice rambled on, and there was no response to be discerned.

“We can’t do anything. He must go on until he is tired,” said Dr Tighe. “And you had better go on the sick-list yourself, Miss North. You’re a good deal knocked about.”

To her astonishment, Mabel found that this was the case. Bruises and flesh-wounds of which she had not been conscious were painfully evident on her arms and shoulders, and her dress was torn in a dozen places. But she refused to leave her post until the time Dr Tighe had appointed her was over; and perceiving that she would not be able to rest while Fitz was in this state, he consented to do what he could for her on the spot, and allowed her to remain for the present. It was almost more heartrending to listen to the often-repeated story of the last few minutes of consciousness Fitz had known, than it had been to see him lying silent, but she remained at her post until the low hurrying tones became intermittent, and finally ceased alto-

gether. By this time the servants had contrived, by means of screens and loose boards, partially to repair, or at least to conceal, the dilapidation of the room, for Dr Tighe declined to attempt the removal of the patient, assuring Mabel cheerfully that he was in the safest place in the fort. Even if the relieving column should chance to drop in a few more shells, all the probabilities were against their falling in the same spot. Thus assured, Mabel consented to allow her own hurts to be looked to, and swallowed with unexpected docility the draught which the doctor gave her. She did so the more readily that she began to be conscious she could not keep up much longer. The vigil and terror of the night, the alarm and anxiety of the day, seemed to have robbed her of every vestige of strength, and she had no mind to allow herself to be ousted from the post which was hers by right. If she was to continue in charge of Fitz, she must contrive to get the doctor on her side, and not alienate him by opposition to his orders.

This time she had no difficulty in obtaining rest. Her eyes closed almost as soon as she threw herself on her bed, and she slept without waking until the evening. When at length she awoke, she sprang up in alarm. Why had no one called her? It was actually getting dark, and the courtyard looked utterly deserted. What had happened? She threw on her dress, and ran along the verandah to the sick-room. Just as she reached it, the screen which served as a door was moved aside, and Dick and Dr Tighe came out, accompanied by a sunburnt elderly man in khaki campaigning uniform.

“My sister,” said Dick laconically. “We have been taking Colonel Slaney to see Anstruther, Mab. Glad to say he thinks he’ll do.”

“Oh, really, really?” cried Mabel, clasping her hands, and looking at the surgeon with eyes suddenly overflowing with tears.

“Well, he’ll never be much of a beauty again,” was the gruff reply.

“Oh, what does that signify? His mind—will that be all right?”

“I hope so—if he can be kept from any more shocks. That shell to-day seems to have been a kill or cure business—I shouldn’t recommend any more of the same sort. You were there at the time—stuck to him—eh? Very plucky thing to do. Well, you just let him alone now. Don’t try to excite his feelings, or make him recognise you. Give the brain time to recover itself.”

“But you are sure it will be all right? Oh, I can’t thank you properly for telling me this—but he will get quite well?”

“Very ungrateful if he doesn’t, with such a nurse. Don’t go and wear yourself to a shadow looking after him while he’s insensible. You’ll need all your cheerfulness and good spirits when he recovers consciousness.”

Mabel looked dumbly at Dr Tighe. What did this warning portend? The little man answered her mute appeal with friendly alacrity.

“At the best he’ll be rather badly scarred, Miss North, but we hope and trust there’ll be nothing else the matter. Colonel Slaney doesn’t mean to imply that you would mind the scars, or that the poor fellow

would care about them for his own sake, but it's likely he will for yours."

"I see. Thank you for telling me. I shall know what to do now," said Mabel, quite calmly, though the screen trembled where her fingers were gripping it.

"Buck up, Queen Mab!" said Dick kindly, lingering behind the other two to give her an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Never say die!"

She caught his hand and wrung it, reading in his action an apology for his hasty speech of the night before, and he smiled at her cheerily as she disappeared behind the screen. Fitz was still lying in the state of stupor in which she had left him, and she sat down beside the bed, and tried to lay her plans for the future. As she recalled what Colonel Slaney had said, it was natural that the man himself should recur to her mind.

"Why, we must be relieved!" she said to herself. "How stupid of me never to have thought of it. Colonel Slaney belongs to the column, of course. And Dick has come back safe, too. And I took it all for granted, and nobody said anything. Where can Georgie be—and Flora?"

Wondering again at the calm way in which the three men had ignored the almost incredible fact of the ending of the siege, she tried to recall her conversation with them, in order to see whether any allusion had been made to it, and suddenly remembered what had struck her vaguely at the time, the stranger's manner. He had not addressed her in the way in which long experience had prepared her

to be addressed ; in fact, she missed the peculiar deference to which she was accustomed from the other sex.

“ He spoke to me just as if I was any other woman ! ” she said to herself, with a *naïveté* which would have struck her as laughable in any one else. “ He was kind and encouraging—patronising, almost. Do I look very dreadful, I wonder ? ” She cast a puzzled glance at her limp cotton gown. “ Still, even then, it’s not usually my clothes that people think about. How Dick would laugh ! He’ll say that the celebrated smile failed of its effect for once.”

Presently an unexpected solution of the mystery occurred to her.

“ Perhaps I’m getting old and ugly, and people won’t care to talk to me any more. How dreadful to have to ask men to do things, instead of their rushing to do them of their own accord ! It will take a long time to get accustomed to it. Oh, and perhaps Fitz won’t care for me now ! If he leaves off loving me just as I have found out that I love him, what shall I do ? I told Georgie once that I would give anything to care for any one as she cared for Dick, but I never thought of not being loved in return. There was some fairy tale about a princess who had no heart, and could not get one without giving everything she had in exchange for it, and that’s how I feel. But how dreadful to get the heart, and then find that it’s not wanted ! If he cares for me still, I don’t mind if I never speak to another man again, but if he doesn’t—— ! ”

There was a step outside, and Flora looked cau-

tiously round the corner of the screen, then advanced, bearing a tray.

“ Oh, Mab, you must have thought we had forgotten you, you poor thing ! ” she murmured, in subdued tones. “ But you were fast asleep when I looked into your room, and we thought it would be kinder not to wake you. We were all in the mess-room verandah to welcome General Cranstoun and the officers of the column. It was lovely to see them come in ; I did wish you were there. And they are all so kind, you can't think ! As soon as ever they heard what we were reduced to, they sent their servants for all sorts of private stores, and gave us everything they could think of that we should like. Look ! here's a cup of tea—strong tea—for you, with milk in it, and I have made you some sandwiches of potted meat. Isn't it good of them ? And they say such nice things about the way we have stood the siege, and they are so interested in the boy, and they admire your brother and Mrs North so much. It's delightful to hear them.”

“ But what has happened to the enemy ? ” asked Mabel.

“ Oh, most of them have surrendered, but Bahram Khan and a body of horse escaped, and got safely to Dera Gul. Major North just succeeded in saving the Amir, and he's in the fort now. Part of the column has gone on to keep an eye on Dera Gul, but the rest will camp here for to-night. Some of the officers are coming in after dinner—doesn't it sound funny to say that again ? You will come and talk to them, won't you ? ”

“ I'll just come and see them—it would seem

rude not to go near them after all they have done for us—but I can't leave him for long. Flora!" suddenly, "do you see anything different in me?"

"You are dreadfully pale and tired, and your dress looks as if you had put it on in a hurry, and your hair isn't very nicely done," said Flora hesitatingly. "Is that what you mean?"

"No—not quite. If—if you were a man, should you still think of me as Queen Mab?"

Flora hesitated still, then suddenly flew at Mabel, and kissed her with great vehemence. "What does it signify?" she demanded. "I shall love you just as well, and so will *he*, and lots of people will love you a great deal more. You're just as lovely really as ever you were."

"Then there is something," cried Mabel. "What is it?"

"I—I don't know, exactly. It's something gone. I have noticed it going, since—I think since Mr Anstruther came back from looking for your brother. It was a sort of assurance—I can't think of the proper word—as if you knew that every one admired you, and you had a right to their services. Yes, that was it. It took every one captive, you know, Mab."

"And now?" asked Mabel, in a low voice.

"Now? Oh, it makes me miserable to see you. You look as if you wanted people to be kind to you, poor darling."

"Only one person," whispered Mabel. "Do you think he will?"

"As if you doubted him! Fraud! If he isn't,

I'll give Fred up, and come and live with you in a hermitage. There!"

"Then I don't mind. I have lost my kingdom, and found a heart."

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT ZEYNAB SAW.

“DICK, I want to speak to you. I’m sure there’s something wrong.”

“There’ll be something wrong with you, if you rush up the steps at that rate, after being out all morning. You haven’t walked back, I hope?”

“No, of course not. I had a doolie. But it’s really important, Dick.”

“I dare say it is, but I won’t listen to a single word until you lie down in that chair and let me fan you. Now let us hear about it. You went to the Refugees’ Camp as usual, and doctored all and sundry?”

It was not in the confined limits of the Memsahibs’ courtyard that this conversation took place, for since the arrival of the relieving column the fort had been practically deserted, owing to its insanitary condition. As the town had also been left by the enemy in an undesirable state, most of the rightful inhabitants were under canvas for the present. Quarters had been found, however, in the large Sarai for a good many of the Europeans, who led a picnic existence in the bare mud rooms, cheered by such remnants of their household goods as they had been

able to save, until the neighbourhood should quiet down, so as to allow them to return to their homes. Bahram Khan was holding out obstinately at Dera Gul, where he appeared to hold in deep contempt the devastation wrought by the besiegers' mountain-guns. They had battered his walls to pieces, but he and his garrison retired to shelters underground, whence they emerged on more than one occasion to frustrate, with considerable loss to the attacking party, attempts to carry the place by assault. Meanwhile, his followers' wives and children, who were not admitted into the fortress, had thrown themselves quite happily on the hands of the besiegers, in the calm confidence that this course would insure their being provided with food, lodging, and medical attendance free of cost. To have despatched them, in their present unprotected condition, to any distance from the British lines would merely have led to their being killed or enslaved by the tribes, and after much discussion they were gathered into a special camp, under the charge of an officer detailed for the duty, which he cursed daily. Here they were looked after in company with the native women and children who had survived the siege, and such of the townspeople as now began to reappear from mysterious hiding-places or cities of refuge. The care of their health was entrusted to Georgia, and every morning she visited the camp and prescribed for any patients that might be awaiting her. It was from one of these visits that she had just returned.

“ I was making a surprise inspection of the huts, Dick—it's necessary every few days, you know—

and I came to one where a number of women who have no children are quartered together. They were not expecting me, and they were just sitting or standing about. One of them was Jehanara."

"My word!" Dick sprang to his feet. "Are you certain, Georgie?"

"Quite. I never forget a face, you know, and hers is a remarkable one."

"And what did you do?"

"I pretended not to have recognised her, and our eyes did not meet, so I don't think she could have seen that I knew her. I finished the inspection, and then, when I was reporting to Major Atkinson, I asked him to arrest her at once, as I was sure she was there as a spy."

"And had she got away in the meantime?"

"Oh dear, no! When I had made Major Atkinson understand which woman I meant, he laughed at me, and said that she was certainly a spy—a spy of our own; and she had a pass signed by the General to allow her to leave the camp when she liked."

"Somebody is being made a nice fool of."

"That's what I thought. If she has come to the General, and offered to betray the fortress to him—that door, you know—and it's all a trap! He doesn't know her as we do. I thought of going to him at once, but then it struck me that he might laugh at me as Major Atkinson did, so I came back to tell you as fast as I could."

"You thought he might be like Burgrave, and dislike ladies' interfering in politics? Well, I suppose I must go myself, and fish for snubs. What

I do admire in all these big chaps is their deep-rooted distrust of the man on the spot. I wonder they don't order us all out of the district before they'll deign to set foot in it."

Before very long Dick was received by General Cranstoun in the seclusion of his tent. To his observant eye, the General's face wore a slightly expectant, not to say conscious expression, and he went straight to the business in hand.

"I should be glad, sir, if you would authorise the arrest of an East Indian woman who calls herself Joanna Warren or Jehanara. She is a secret agent of Bahram Khan's, and my wife found her secreted in the Refugees' Camp this morning."

"There is no such person in the camp," was the terse reply.

"What! has she got away already?" cried Dick. "Excuse me, but this may be a serious matter. Did she know that she was recognised?"

"I believe not. I understand that when she heard it was Mrs North's habit to visit the camp, she considered it unwise to remain there longer."

"I wish to goodness I knew whether that was all," muttered Dick. "Is there any hope of getting hold of her still?"

"I do not know. The matter does not appear to me to lie in your province, Major North, and I am not prepared to offer you any assistance."

"Perhaps you are not aware, sir, that the woman in question is Bahram Khan's most trusted counsellor? It is generally understood that all our recent misfortunes are attributable to her influence,

and I know personally that she has done an immense amount of harm."

"Perhaps you are not aware that the unfortunate woman of whom you are speaking has been for years most cruelly ill-used by Bahram Khan, and has vowed vengeance upon him in consequence? But I am not at liberty to say more upon the subject."

"No!" cried Dick, with sudden enlightenment, "because she made you promise to say nothing to me before she would utter a word. She told you that I was brutally unsympathetic, and had insulted her in her misfortunes, and that I forbade my wife to receive her?"

"These are facts of which I should scarcely expect you to be proud, Major North." Still, the General looked uncomfortable.

"I am prouder of them than I should be of being taken in by the most cunning Jezebel in India. The woman hasn't a grain of truth in her composition."

"I have been considered a good judge of character," said General Cranstoun severely, "and I would stake my life on Miss Warren's truthfulness. She has told me something of her history, and her manner left on my mind the most extraordinary impression of impotent fury thirsting for revenge. No acting could have produced the effect."

"And so you are going to stake your life on her truthfulness? and the lives of her Majesty's troops? I see it all!" cried Dick, with growing excitement. "You are to be at the north-east corner of the

Dera Gul rock with a body of picked men at a certain time, when she will open a door leading into the subterranean passages. Guided by her, you will make your way up with your detachment to the gate opening on the zigzag path, and hold it until the rest of your force comes up. Then the fortress is in your hands."

"Why—how in the world did you know this?"

"I am acquainted with the lady, you see."

"But the door—how did you hear about that?"

"I have seen it. When the place was empty, before it was restored to Bahram Khan, I explored it thoroughly."

"And you never told me of the existence of the door? I should have imagined that the interests of the public service would have prevailed over any slight personal jealousy——"

"I didn't mention it," said Dick, "because the door is a portion of the solid rock, and can only be opened from within. It is lifted by a complicated arrangement of weights and pulleys, and a dozen women couldn't make it stir. I should say it needed ten men at least."

The General's brow gathered blackness. "Your information would have been more valuable had it come earlier," he said. "In the circumstances, I do not feel justified in abandoning an excellent opportunity of ending this revolt, merely in view of your suspicions."

"They are certainties. Say that you and your picked men are trapped in the cave—the door works from above. The only way out is up a narrow staircase, which only one man can climb

at a time, but there are holes high up through which you could be shot down in dozens. Once inside, Bahram Khan has you safe—to use as a hostage, if he likes.”

“I should not feel justified in abandoning the attempt,” repeated the General, “but,” he added, with a degree less of severity, “if you can suggest any precautions that might render success more certain, I shall be glad to consider them.”

“There are to be no lights, I suppose? Then I would let every man except those in the front rank carry a block of stone. We can get them out of the ruins not far off, and if they are piled up at the sides of the doorway—I’ll show the men how to do it—the door can’t come right down, at any rate. Then, Jehanara has arranged with you that the rest of the force shall advance up the zigzag path at a signal from the gate? The enemy’s fire commands every foot of the way, and we can’t shell them to any purpose at night. But if, instead of climbing up on that side, our main body was making a determined assault with scaling-ladders upon the opposite side of the fortress, where the walls come down to the level, that would distract the attention of the garrison if you found it necessary to retire from the cave. My idea is that as soon as you are well inside, the door will go down, and you will be summoned to surrender. But the door will stick, and you will be able to retire in good order, and form outside. Then, even if the attack did not come off quite at the same moment, you would be prepared to resist the garrison if they charged, and be sheltered against their fire from above. And the best part of the plan,”

added Dick cunningly, "is that there is no need to break faith with Jehanara. If she means well by you, everything will go off just as you arranged, and her feelings will not be hurt by the knowledge of my base suspicions."

"Major North," said the General, holding out his hand, "I have done you an injustice. The arrangements you suggest seem to obviate all risk, and I shall be glad if you will accompany me, in order to direct the men who will carry the stones. The details of the main attack I will arrange immediately."

"Then when was the attempt to be made, sir?"

"To-night, of course. *Is to be made*, if you please."

"That was a pretty close shave!" muttered Dick to himself, when he was safely outside.

And thus it came to pass that there was yet another night in which Georgia and Flora, unable to sleep, sat together in one of the bleak rooms of the Sarai, and held each other's hands in an agony of fear and anxiety, while Mabel stole in at intervals from her watch beside Fitz to ask whether there was any news yet. Over and over again the anxious watchers persuaded themselves that they could hear the sound of firing echoed across the miles of desert which separated them from Dera Gul, and on each occasion they assured one another that the idea was absurd. Mrs Hardy came in several times to scold them for sitting up, twice spoiling the effect of her rebukes by administering hot coffee as a corrective, but she knew as well as they did that they could not

bring themselves to face the solitude of their own rooms. At last, just as day was breaking, a messenger came from the signal officer at the camp to say that flash-signals of some sort were visible to the eastward, but the mists of the morning made it impossible to read them properly. There was still an hour or so more of weary waiting, and then Dick and Haycraft rode in together, the latter with his arm in a sling. He had been knocked from one of the scaling-ladders by a stone hurled at him, and the bone was broken, but otherwise he was only bruised. And what did even a broken arm signify, when there was victory at last?

“It was just as we thought,” Dick told Georgia. “As soon as we were inside the cave, I saw the door begin to come down—shutting out the stars, don’t you know? and a voice called out to us to surrender. But just when the door ought to have descended with a crash, it made a grating noise instead, and stuck fast, for the stones were piled about four feet high on each side. The enemy saw the dodge in a moment, and opened fire through the holes up above, but as we were all in the dark, it was a pretty wild affair. Two or three were wounded, and from the back of the cave came an awful scream—a woman’s scream. It was that wretched Jehanara, who had tried to escape up the staircase, and was shot down by mistake. So now we shall never know—or, rather, the General won’t—whether she was deceived herself, or deceiving us. Then, as we got out of the place, we heard the sound of the attack on the other side, and we raced round to take part in it. Our men were already in at the breach the shells

had made, and by the time we got up they were fighting hand to hand inside. We pressed the garrison back from point to point, until we came to the zenana. It seems that Bahram Khan had talked big about killing all his women before the end came, but his plucky old mother didn't quite see it. She and the rest barricaded themselves in, all except Bahram Khan's wife Zeynab, and kept him out. The fellow made a great fuss about breaking down the barricade, and went off to find a hammer or pickaxe or something to do it with, but we got there first. The men he had left fought to the last in front of the barricade, and behind it the old Begum held out stoutly until I came up, when she surrendered at discretion. Then we found out from one of our wounded that Bahram Khan and his wife had got away through the cave, with either two or three of his men, so that he is still at large, though the place is in our hands. Of course the regiment is scouring the country for him, and the tribes are all thirsting for the reward that will be offered, but it is a horrid bother."

"Zeynab will scarcely be the help to him that Jehanara would have been," said Georgia.

"No, but I don't like his being loose. I shall get them to post a sentry at the gate here, as well as the Sikh at Burgrave's door, and none of you must go outside without an escort. Mab mustn't try any more of her adventurous rides."

"Why, Dick, there's no one for her to ride with at present."

"No more there is, happily. Well, I shall be thankful if her devotion to Anstruther lasts long

enough to keep her between walls just now. Bahram Khan driven desperate would be an ugly customer to meet out in the open."

It was a source of considerable relief to Dick to learn that at this particular time Mabel was less likely than ever to quit her charge. Two or three days before, she had astonished Dr Tighe by demanding to be allowed to assist in dressing the patient's burns. The doctor, who had contrived, with what he regarded as almost superhuman cunning, always to accomplish this process at a time when she was not on duty, was much perplexed by the request.

"Trust me," he urged; "I'll let you help as soon as it's desirable."

Mabel shook her head. "You don't understand," she said. "I want to know the worst while he is still unconscious. I think I can trust myself not to make any sign, but I am not sure, and if it is very dreadful—oh, it would break my heart if he thought I shrank from him because of his scars!"

"But, my dear young lady, that's all the more reason for waiting. The wounds will be far less painful to look at when they are a little more healed."

"That's just it. If I see them now, at their worst, I can't be horrified afterwards. I want to be able to judge of the improvement, so that I may cheer him if he thinks he is not getting on."

Dr Tighe muttered fiercely to himself, but yielded at last, and allowed Mabel to act as his assistant at the next dressing. She thought she had schooled herself to bear the worst, but in spite of all her resolutions she shrank and shivered involuntarily

when she realised the frightful change in the dark handsome face she had always secretly admired. Dr Tighe, going about his work with swift, practised fingers, said nothing, and pretended not to notice the drops of water which splashed upon him from the basin she held.

“ Will he—can he ever look at all as he did ? ” she asked in a whisper at last.

“ If things turn out as I hope, he will look no worse than a man who is badly marked with small-pox. There will be two or three ugly seams—here and here ”—he indicated the precise spots lightly with a finger-tip—“ but the hair will help to cover them when it grows again, and if the mouth is much disfigured—why, you must lay your commands upon the patient to grow a beard.”

Mabel was crying. “ Oh, it is too dreadful, too dreadful ! ” she sobbed.

“ Then you had better leave the sick-room to me before he recovers consciousness. There’s no need to make things worse for him by raising false hopes. Either stick to him, disfigurements and all, or don’t let him know that he ever had the chance of marrying you.”

“ It’s not for myself ; it’s for him ! ” flashed forth Mabel. “ Stick to him ? of course I shall. He himself is not changed. But I can’t be too thankful that I have seen him like this. At least I know the worst.”

Again the doctor was puzzled. Was she forcing herself to keep faith, for shame or pity’s sake, or was she really in love still ? He did not attempt to argue the matter with her, and nothing more was

said on the subject for a day or two. Then the doctor stopped Mabel one morning at the door of the sick-room.

“One moment, Miss North. Has the patient ever exhibited any signs of consciousness in your presence—tried to speak, or anything of the sort?”

“Never,” said Mabel, in surprise. “I should have told you if he had.”

“I didn’t know whether you might be luxuriating in the sentimental satisfaction of feeling that you were the only person he recognised. You needn’t be angry; from your point of view it would be very natural. Well, I can’t make it out, then.”

“But has he spoken again—are there any signs——?”

“Not a word. But I can’t help thinking that there may be a kind of semi-consciousness about him—ability to distinguish light from darkness, or a loud noise from silence, perhaps—and I am almost certain that he knows when you are there. There are minute variations of temperature and pulse which correspond day after day, marking the difference between your presence and absence. It’s a queer thing.”

“And you think he will soon be quite conscious? Oh, Doctor!” and this hope it was that kept Mabel so closely within the walls of the Sarai as to satisfy even Dick. But no further change in the patient’s condition seemed to reward her eager watchfulness. Dr Tighe said nothing more, and Mabel was afraid to ask questions. Any good news he would surely tell her, and she did not want to hear any that was bad.

After another three days, however, he stopped her again outside the sick-room.

“Miss North, I’m going to give that poor fellow away. I won’t presume to inquire into your feelings towards him, but unless you can take him, scarred as he will be, without a qualm, you had better keep away from him in future. He is conscious, but he guesses how it is with him, and he means to tire you out. He has settled in his own mind that if he shows no gratitude for your nursing, and no interest in your presence, you will leave him alone, so that he won’t be tempted to take advantage of your pity for him. So he lies there like a log, and the self-repression is bad for him. I would be glad to see you end it one way or another.”

“Do you mean that he can speak, and see, and hear, but pretends he can’t?” demanded Mabel.

“No, no. He can’t see—because of the bandage over his eyes, if for no other reason—and he can’t speak intelligibly. But he can hear, and he can answer questions by moving his right hand for yes, and his left for no. That’s how I found it all out.”

“And he has pretended not to be able to hear a sound! Why, I might have said anything to him—anything! Happily I haven’t,” catching the doctor’s eye, “for Colonel Slaney told me so particularly not to excite him. But what do you want me to do?”

“To please yourself. Either make him understand that you mean to stick to him, or simply stay away. It’ll be better for him.”

“Which have you told him you expect I shall do?” asked Mabel, turning upon him. The doctor looked guilty.

"I'd have had the greatest pleasure in preparing the poor fellow's mind, if I'd known," he confessed, "but for the life of me I couldn't decide which you'd be likely to do."

"Thanks for your high opinion of me," said Mabel, entering the room with a short laugh. "Perhaps you will kindly notice that I am putting an end to your doubts at this moment."

Such was the confused condition of Dr Tighe's mind that he did not at first realise the bearing of this sentence. Indeed, it was not until he was busy in his improvised surgery half-an-hour later that he perceived its full import, and made the bottles ring again with the shout of joy which greeted his discovery. As for Mabel she sat down in her usual place beside the bed, and bent over the patient.

"Fitz," she said very distinctly, "I want to speak to you. You needn't pretend you can't hear, for I know Dr Tighe has been talking to you. Raise your right hand when you mean yes, and your left when you mean no."

No movement of any kind followed, but Mabel was not to be daunted.

"I understand," she went on, "that you don't like me to be here, and would rather I left off helping to nurse you?"

This time the right hand was unmistakably raised an inch or so.

"I have no right to offer any objection," resumed Mabel, "but I don't think you need have left Dr Tighe to tell me about it. I suppose I ought to have known that I had treated you too badly for you ever to care for me again."

The left hand was shaken two or three times with pathetic vehemence.

“Then some one has told you,” indignantly, “how old and wretched I am beginning to look. Even Flora confesses it—I made her tell me—but she said she loved me just the same. I said I shouldn’t mind it, if it didn’t prevent my friends caring for me—and there were one or two to whom I felt sure it would make no difference. I never thought that you——No, you are not to touch that bandage,” intercepting a feeble movement of one hand towards the eyes. “Do you want to be blind? But it’s better as it is,” with a heavy sigh—“better that we should part now. I mean, I couldn’t bear you to think me ugly.”

Again the left hand was shaken vehemently.

“Do you mean that it isn’t that? Then there’s only one other thing it can possibly be. You don’t believe I can be faithful, though you can; and you haven’t realised that it’s just this accident of yours which removes my objection to you. You know I said you would look so dreadfully young compared with me. Well, no one can say that now. You will look like a battered veteran, and though I have gone off so dreadfully, I shall look quite youthful beside you. Do you understand?”

The right hand was lifted somewhat doubtfully.

“I’m glad of that. Because, you see, I have told people that we are engaged, and it would be such a very uncomfortable thing if I had to contradict it. Now listen. Flora and I have agreed that I am not Queen Mab any longer, but if you agree it will be very rude.” Up came the left hand with alacrity.

“That’s right ; then I am still Queen Mab to you, and I lay my commands on you that this sort of thing is not to happen again. I mean to help nurse you, whether you like it or not, and you will get well much sooner if you make up your mind to like it. But even if you don’t, I won’t give you up.”

Both hands were raised, with an imploring gesture, and Mabel took them in her own, and hid her face in them.

“Because I love you, Fitz. You couldn’t have the heart to send me away after that, could you ? Don’t try to talk ; I understand.”

Returning to her watch that evening, Mabel met the Commissioner, who stopped to inquire after Fitz.

“He is conscious ; he knows me,” she answered joyfully, adding, after a moment’s hesitation, “I think perhaps you will like to know that it is all right between us now.”

“I am very glad to hear it. I hope from my heart that you may be absolutely happy. As for Anstruther,” added Mr Burgrave, in his old courtly way, “there can be no question as to his happiness.”

“We shall always feel that we owe it very much to you,” faltered Mabel.

“It is extremely kind of you to say so. I am leaving early to-morrow, and that is a pleasant assurance to carry with me. I hoped I should meet you this evening, as I am dining at your brother’s, but I see you have other duties.”

“I am so sorry—I didn’t understand—how stupid of me !” cried Mabel. “Are you leaving the frontier altogether ?”

“ I am returning in the first instance to Bab-us-Sahel, to take up my regular duties again. My visit to the frontier has extended over a preposterous length of time, owing first to my accident and then to the rising, and I fear it has thrown the machinery of government a good deal out of gear. Personally, however, I cannot bring myself to regret it. I have enjoyed many important experiences, for which I did not bargain when I set out.”

Mabel's eyes fell before the kindly look in his. “ Can you ever forgive me ? ” she murmured.

“ I have nothing to forgive. The fault was mine.” He bowed over the hand she held out to him. “ The Queen can do no wrong.”

They parted, and Mr. Burgrave went on to the Norths' quarters, two small square rooms without a door, and possessing only one small window apiece, high up in the back wall. One side was open to the courtyard of the Sarai, and at night was somewhat inadequately closed by means of curtains and Venetian blinds. The dinner-table had been laid with the help of contributions from the Grahams and the Hardys, and the Commissioner pretended politely not to recognise his own reading-lamp, the only large lamp belonging to the community that had escaped the chances of war and earthquake. Flora, whose father was dining with the General, occupied Mabel's vacant place, and did her part in helping to arrange the impromptu drawing-room at the back of the room. There were screens and a brazier, to mitigate the coldness of the evening air, and for furniture the camp-chairs which had played so many parts in the economy of the siege.

Dick had received strict injunctions to offer his guest a cigar, and Georgia and Flora were prepared to efface themselves so far as to retire into the bedroom should Mr Burgrave's principles forbid him to smoke in the presence of ladies, but their self-sacrifice was not needed. No sooner were the chairs arranged than the Commissioner, who had been helping to carry them behind the screen prepared to take his leave.

"I will ask you to excuse me early," he said to Georgia, "for I have a good deal of writing to do, and Mr Beltring has been good enough to offer to take poor Beardmore's place for this evening."

He hesitated for a moment, turned to go, and then came back again.

"I think perhaps I had better explain something that might perplex you in the future," he said, speaking to Dick, but including Georgia. "It has to do with the frontier question."

"I thought we had come to an agreement on that subject," said Dick, with some apprehension.

"Pardon me, I agreed to withdraw my report in deference to your representations, but I still think your principles unsound—radically unsound."

The rest gazed at him in alarm, and he went on. "Your custom of intervening in trans-frontier disputes, and practically exercising authority outside our own borders is diametrically opposed to the traditional policy of the Government. I am bound to admit that it seems to succeed in your case, but it needs exceptional men to carry it out. You, Major, especially with Mrs North to assist you"—he bowed to Georgia—"are unquestionably a power to be

reckoned with all along this frontier, but what would befall the ordinary civil servant who might be sent to succeed you ? ”

“ That’s just it,” said Dick. “ You mustn’t send us the common or garden office-wallah up here. Let me pick the right man—whether he’s a wild rattlepate like Anstruther, or a steady plodding chap like Beltring—and give him the right rough-and-tumble sort of training, till he knows the tribes like a brother, and there’s your exceptional man ready when you want him. Only he must be the right sort to begin with, and he must be caught young.”

“ A possible clue to my own lack of success up here ! ” mused the Commissioner. “ Still, I fear you will scarcely find that any Government will look with favour upon a system that would practically make the frontier a close preserve for you and your pupils. But this is what I wished to say. I can’t conscientiously work with you on your lines, though I have promised not to oppose you, and therefore I am recommending the severance of the frontier districts from those of Khemistan proper, and their erection into a separate agency under an officer answerable directly to the Viceroy. Don’t think I have tried to shift the responsibility from my own shoulders. It seemed that while we could not well work together, we might work side by side. I have done the best I can.”

He went out precipitately, one of the servants hastening to light him to his own quarters, thus restoring the lamp. Those left behind looked at each other.

“ Poor old chap ! ” said Dick. “ It’s about the

worst thing he could have done for himself, and it's not very much good to us. The Great Great One can scarcely be expected to welcome such a slap in the face as that. His own nominee, sent to carry out his very own policy, recommending its reversal, not because his views have changed, but simply because facts are against him!"

They sat talking round the brazier in the dusk for some time, until there was a footstep outside, and Beltring pushed aside the screen and entered. He had a paper in his hand.

"Why, you are all in the dark, Mrs North!" he said. "Never mind, I can tell you the great news. The Commissioner has just had a telegram that the rumour of the Viceroy's resignation is true. Lord Torvalvin is coming out instead."

"Torvalvin!" cried Dick. "Then the frontier's safe."

"And you will be warden of the marches still," said Flora.

"That seems to make me out a sort of Vicar of Bray," grumbled Dick.

"It's only Flora's poetical way of speaking," said Georgia. "I'm sure it sounds much better to talk of keeping the marches than of running the frontier."

"Yes," said Flora. "I was thinking of the inscription in Sir Walter Scott's hall at Abbotsford, about the 'men wha keepit the marchys in the old tyme for the Kyng. Trewe men war they in their tyme, and in their defence God them defendyt.'"

"I like that," said Georgia softly.

"Well," said Dick, "it's all very well for me, but Torvalvin's coming out will be a fearful blow for

Burgrave. I suppose he will feel bound to resign, for I certainly don't see how they can work together. Did he seem much cut up, Beltring?"

"He didn't show it, sir. Only said he thought you would like to see the telegram. Why, his lamp has gone out!" Beltring had reached the threshold on his way back. "Good heavens! what's that?"

A wild uproar was arising from the camp, which stretched into the desert beyond the Sarai, and alternate cries of "Dīn! Dīn!" and "Ghazis!" were discernible.

"A Ghazi raid!" cried Dick, springing for his sword. "Georgie, take the boy and Rahah, and barricade yourself in with Mab and Miss Graham. You have two revolvers, and I'll send help as soon as possible. Take the chairs. They'll help you to build up a corner."

Rahah ran out with the baby, and Dick and Beltring saw the ladies safely to the door of the sick-room, then rushed to the gateway, where they stumbled over the dead body of the sentry. The tumult in the camp still continued, shouts and yells coming from several directions mingled with the sound of shots, but in each case all was quiet again before they arrived at the point of interest. Such of the troops as were new to the frontier looked somewhat ashamed when they realised that the attack which had thrown the camp into confusion was the work of only four men, but the more experienced knew that four desperate fanatics, armed to the teeth, and determined to kill until they themselves were killed, were by no means foes to be despised. The one who had fought most obstinately wore a green turban, and

Dick nodded grimly as he caught sight of his face.

"Bahram Khan! I thought so," he said. "But I'm afraid there's been the devil's own work done in the Sarai. Bring torches."

A number of officers ran back with him to the gateway, where the sentry was found to have been dexterously strangled from behind. Entering the courtyard, they turned towards the Commissioner's quarters, which were still in darkness. Suddenly Dick's foot slipped.

"Another body here!" he said, and some one brought forward a torch. To their astonishment, it was a woman who lay before them, dressed in rich native garments, which, with the coarse *chadar* covering her face, were soaked with blood. She had been stabbed in the breast, but was still breathing heavily. Sending a messenger for Dr Tighe, they went on, in growing dread as to what they might find. Their fears were justified. On the verandah lay the Sikh sentry, stabbed in the back, and on the floor of his office was the body of the Commissioner, hacked and disfigured almost beyond recognition with a hundred wounds. It did not need the verdict of Dr Tighe to assure the men who stood round that life was extinct.

"What can have been the reason? Why the Commissioner and not North?" were the questions that passed from mouth to mouth, as Dick tore down a curtain and laid it reverently over the body, with the help of Dr Tighe.

"Perhaps the woman can tell us something. She seems conscious now," said some one, but when the

doctor knelt down beside her she pulled her veil feebly over her face, moaning out a name the while.

“ She won’t let me touch her. She’s a *pardah nishin*,” he said, rising. “ It’s the doctor lady she’s asking for, Major.”

Dick went himself to fetch his wife, and the men stood aside a little as Georgia tried to stanch the gaping wound, which was draining the poor creature’s life away. The woman herself laughed weakly.

“ It matters not, O doctor lady. I shall follow my lord.”

“ You are little Zeynab ? ” asked Georgia gently, looking into the drawn face.

“ I am that luckless one, O doctor lady, and I die thus for the sake of the kindness thou didst show me many years ago.”

“ Don’t talk now,” said Georgia. “ Tell me afterwards.”

“ Nay, I must speak now, for soon it will be too late. Six days we have been hiding here and there, O doctor lady, my lord and his three servants and I, and this evening we were in the shadow of the oleanders beside the gate. Thence we saw the Kumpsioner Sahib return to his house with a light carried before him, and presently there came out a young sahib with a *chit* in his hand, and crossed the courtyard. Then my lord said, ‘ It is time,’ and two of his followers slew the guard at the gate, while he and the third flung themselves like tigers upon the accursed Sikh on the verandah, and killed him without a cry. I, who had crept after them, saw the Kumpsioner Sahib sitting at a table with the light in front

of him, and a pistol at his right hand—for truly he feared my lord, even in his own house—and I saw also that my lord had crept in like a cat, and was stretching out his hand over his shoulder for the pistol. But as he took away the pistol, the Kump-sioner Sahib saw his hand, and turned round and sprang up. Then one of the other men blew at the lamp to put it out, and the light burned low. And my lord laughed and said in the Persian tongue, ‘We meet at last, O Barkaraf Sahib. Thou didst indeed believe that victory was thine, but if Nāth Sahib’s sister is not for me, neither is she for thee. Death is thy bride.’ At first it seemed to me that the Kump-sioner Sahib was about to speak, but he stood up straight with his arms folded, and said nothing, until my lord added divers other taunts, when he said, ‘Take not the name of that lady upon thy lips, O low-born one. Dost thou fear to strike me, who am here unarmed, that thou speakest evil of a woman who is absent?’ Then my lord struck him with his dagger, and the lamp went out, and they all fell upon him, and stabbed him many times. And coming out, my lord found me, and said, ‘Go through the midst of the Sarai, and cry out aloud for the doctor lady, that she may come out and we may slay her and her son, and it may be the accursed Nāth Sahib himself also.’ But I would not, O doctor lady, and therefore it was that my lord stabbed me, and that I die now at his hand.” With a sudden convulsive movement, she tore away Georgia’s hand from the wound, and struggled to her feet, then staggered and fell. Georgia caught her in her arms, but the dressing had been dislodged, and

the blood streamed forth again as the dark head dropped heavily on her shoulder.

They buried the Commissioner in the little cemetery at Alibad, and for days people went about saying that it was the irony of fate that his grave should be next to that of General Keeling. It was Georgia who chose the spot, however, and she thought otherwise.

“He would have been a man after my father’s own heart, if he had known him,” said Georgia, “though I don’t say they wouldn’t have wrangled on theoretical questions from morning to night. But when I think that with death staring him in the face, he would not say a word that might turn their thoughts to Fitz, who was only a few feet away, and absolutely helpless, I feel that he was one of the bravest men I have ever known.”

Not all the opinions expressed concerning the dead man were so favourable, however. On the evening of his funeral two Pathan soldiers from one of the relieving regiments met Ismail Bakhsh near the cemetery, and saluted him with marked friendliness.

“O brother,” they said, “we have heard that the famous general, Sinjāj Kīlin Sahīb Bahadar, is wont to ride abroad upon this border by night. Is this so?”

“It is true,” returned the old trooper, “and I myself have heard him, not once nor twice. And, moreover, what these eyes of mine have beheld, it is not wise to relate.”

“Pray, brother, tell us when these things may be

seen and heard? We have a great desire to make proof of them for ourselves."

"Nay," said Ismail Bakhsh, with a lofty smile, "for that ye must wait awhile. It is only when there is trouble on the border that the General Sahib rides, and"—with a wave of the hand towards the new-made grave—"the troubler of the border lies there."

THE END.

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